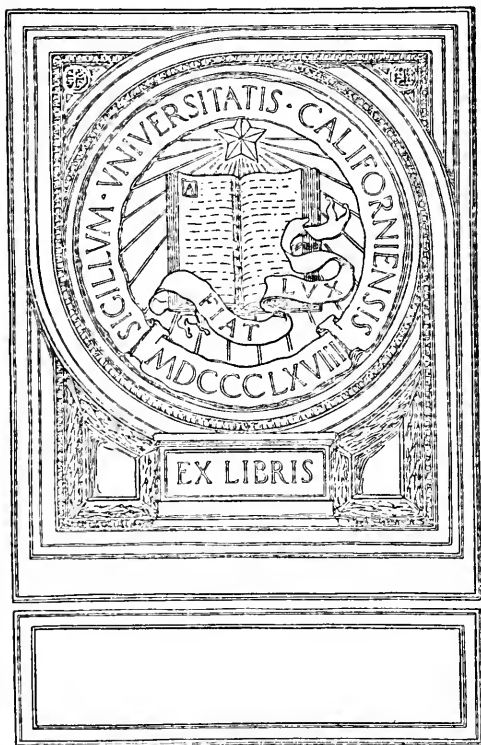



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M. OR N.

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M. O R N.

"SIMILIA SIMILIBUS CURANTUR."

BY G. J. WHYTE-MELVILLE,

AUTHOR OF "DIGBY GRAND," "CERISE," "THE GLADIATORS," ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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M. OR N.

“*Similia similibus curantur.*”

CHAPTER I.

“SMALL AND EARLY.”

A WILD wet night in the Channel, the white waves leaping, lashing, and tumbling together in that confusion of troubled waters, which nautical men call a “cross-sea.” A dreary, dismal night on Calais sands: faint moonshine struggling through a low driving scud, the harbour-lights quenched and blurred in mist. Such a night as bids the trim French sentry hug himself in his watch-coat, calmly cursing the weather, while he hums the chorus of a comic opera, driving his thoughts by force of contrast to the lustrous glow of the wine-shop,

the sparkling eyes and gold ear-rings of Mademoiselle Thérèse, who presides over Love and Bacchus therein. Such a night as gives the travellers in the mail-packet some notion of those ups and downs in life which landsmen may bless themselves to ignore, as hints to the Queen's Messenger, seasoned though he be, that ten minutes more of that heaving, pitching, tremulous motion would lay him alongside those poor sick neophytes whom he pities and condemns; reminding him how even *he* has cause to be thankful when he reflects that, save for an occasional Levanter, the Mediterranean is a mill-pond compared to La Manche. Such a night as makes the hardy fisherman running for Havre or St. Valérie growl his "Babord" and "Tribord" in harsher tones than usual to his mate, because he cannot keep his thoughts off Marie and the little ones ashore; his dark-eyed Marie, praying her heart out to the Virgin on her knees, feeling, as the fierce wind howls and blusters round their hut, that not on her wedding-morning, not on that summer

eve when he won her down by the sea, did she love her Pierre so dearly, as now in this dark boisterous weather, that causes her very flesh to creep while she listens to its roar. Nobody who could help it would be abroad on Calais sands. "Pas même un Anglais!" mutters the sentry, ordering his firelock with a ring, and wishing it was time for the Relief. But an Englishman *is* out nevertheless, wandering aimlessly to and fro on the beach; turning his face to windward against the driving rain; trying to think the wet on his cheek is all from *without*; vainly hoping to stifle grief, remorse, anxiety, by exposure and active bodily exercise.

"How could I stay in that cursed room?" he mutters, striding wildly among the sand-hills. "The very tick of the clock was enough to drive one mad in those long fearful pauses—solemn and silent as death! Can't the fools do anything for her? What is the use of nurses and doctors, and all the humbug of medicine and science? My darling! my

darling! It was too cruel to hear you wailing and crying, and to know I could do you no good! What a coward I am to have fled into the wilderness like a murderer! I couldn't have stayed there, I feel I couldn't! I wish I hadn't listened at the door! Only yesterday you seemed so well and in such good spirits, with your dark eyes looking so patiently and fondly into mine! And now, if she should die!—if she should die!”

Then he stands stock-still, turning instinctively from the wind like one of the brutes, while the past comes back in a waking dream so akin to reality, that even in his pre-occupation he seems to live the last year of his life over again. Once more he is at the old place in Cheshire, whither he has gone like any other young dandy, an agreeable addition to a country shooting-party because of his chestnut locks, his blue eyes, his handsome person, and general recklessness of character: agreeable, he reflects, to elderly *roués* and established married women, but a scarecrow to mothers, and a

stumbling-block to daughters, as being utterly penniless and rather good-for-nothing. Once more he comes down late for dinner, to find a vacant place by that beautiful girl, with her delicate features, her wealth of raven hair, above all, with the soft, sad, dreamy eyes, that look so loving, so trustful, and so good. In such characters as theirs these things are soon accomplished. A walk or two, a waltz, a skein of silk to wind, a drive in a pony-carriage, an afternoon church, and behold them in the memorable summer-house, where he won her heart — completely and unreservedly, while flinging down his own! Then came all the sweet excitement, all the fascinating mystery of mutual understanding, of stolen glances, of hidden meanings in the common phrases and daily courtesies of social life. It was so delightful for each to feel that other existence bound up in its own, to look down from their enchanted mountain, with pity not devoid of contempt on the commonplace dwellers on the plain, undeterred by proofs more numerous

perhaps on the hills of Paphos than in any other airy region, that

“Great clymbers fall unsoft ;”

to know that come sorrow, suffering, disgrace, or misfortune, there was refuge and safety for the poor, broken-winged bird, though its plumage were torn by the fowler’s cruelty, or even soiled in the storm of shame. Alas ! that the latter should arrive too soon !

Perhaps of this young couple, the girl, in her perfect faith and entire self-sacrifice, may have been less aghast than her lover at the imminence of discovery, reprobation, and scorn. When no other course was left open, she eloped willingly enough with the man she had trusted—shutting her eyes to consequences, in that recklessness of devotion which, lead though it may to much unhappiness in life, constitutes not the least lovable trait of the female character, so ready to burst into extremes of right and wrong.

Besides, who cares for consequences at nine-

teen, with the sun glinting on the waves of the Channel, the sea-air freshening cheek and brow, the coast of Picardy rising bright and glistening, in smiles of welcome, and the dear, fond face looking down so proudly and wistfully on its treasure? Consequences indeed! They have been left with the heavy baggage at London Bridge, to reach their proper owner possibly hereafter in Paris; but meantime, with this fresh breeze blowing—on the blue sea—under the blue sky—they do not exist—there are no such things!

These young people were very foolish, very wicked, but they loved each other very dearly. Mr. Bruce was none of those heartless, unscrupulous Lovelaces, oftener met with in fiction than in real life, who can forget they are *men* as well as gentlemen; and when he crossed the Channel with Miss Algernon, it was from sheer want of forethought, from mismanagement, no doubt, but still more from misfortune, that she was Miss Algernon still.

To marry, was to be disinherited—that he

knew well enough ; but neither he nor his Nina, as he called her, would have paused for this consideration. There were other difficulties, trivial in appearance, harassing, vexatious, insurmountable in reality, that yet seemed from day to day about to vanish ; so they waited, and temporized, and hesitated, till the opportunity came of escaping together, and they availed themselves of it without delay.

Now they had reached French ground, and were free, but it was too late ! That was why Mr. Bruce roamed so wildly to-night over the Calais sands, tortured by a cruel fear that he might lose the treasure of his heart for ever ; exaggerating, in that supreme moment of anxiety, her sufferings, her danger, perhaps even her priceless value to himself.

To do him justice, he did not think for an instant of the many galling annoyances to which both must be subjected hereafter in the event of her coming safely through her trial. He found no time to reflect on a censorious world, an outraged circle of friends, an in-

furiated family ; on the cold shoulder Mrs. Grundy would turn upon his darling, and the fair mark he would himself be bound to offer that grim old father, who had served under Wellington, or that soft-spoken dandy brother in the Guards, unerring at "rocketers," and deadly for all ground game, neither of whom would probably shoot the wider, under the circumstances that he, the offender, felt in honour he must stand at least one discharge without retaliation, an arrangement which makes twelve paces uncomfortably close quarters for the passive and immovable target. He scarcely dwelt a moment on the bitter scorn with which his own great-uncle, whose natural heir he was, would calmly and deliberately curse this piece of childish folly, while he disinherited its perpetrator without scruple or remorse. He never even considered the disadvantage under which a life that ought to be very dear to him was now opening on the world : a life that might be blighted through its whole course by his own folly, punished, a score of years hence, for

unwittingly arriving a few weeks too soon. No! He could think of nothing but Nina's anguish and Nina's danger; could only wander helplessly backwards and forwards, stupefied by the continuous gusts of that boisterous sea-wind, stunned by the dull wash of the incoming tide, feeling for minutes at a time, a numbed, apathetic impotency; till, roused and stung by a rush of recurring apprehensions, he hastened back to his hotel, white, agitated, dripping wet, moving with wavering gestures and swift, irregular strides, like a man in a trance.

At the foot of the staircase he ran into the arms of a dapper French doctor, young, yet experienced, a man of science, a man of pleasure, an anatomist, a dancer, a philosopher, and a dandy—who put both hands on his shoulders, and looked in his face with so comical an expression of congratulation, sympathy, pity, and amusement, that Mr. Bruce's fears vanished on the instant, and he found voice to ask, in husky accents, “if it was over?”

“Over!” repeated the doctor. “Pardon,

my good sir. For our interesting young friend it is only just begun. A young lady, monsieur, a veritable little aristocrat, with a delicate nose, and, my faith, sound and powerful lungs! I make you my compliment, monsieur. I am happy to be the first to advertise you of good news. It is late. Let madame be kept tranquil. You will permit me to wish you good-night. I will return again in the morning."

"And she is safe?" exclaimed Bruce, crushing the doctor's hand in a grasp like a vice.

"Safe!" answered the little man. "Parbleu—yes—for the present, safe as the mole in the harbour, and likely to remain so if you will only keep out of the room. Come, you shall see her for one quite little moment. She desires it so much. And when I scratch at the door thus, you will come out. Agreed? Enter then. You shall embrace your child."

So the good-natured man turned into the hotel again, to conduct Mr. Bruce back to the door from which he had fled in anguish an hour or two ago, and was thus five minutes

too late for another professional engagement, which could not be postponed, but went on indeed very well without him, the expectant lady being a person of experience, the wife of a Calais fisherman, and now employed for the thirteenth time in her yearly occupation. But this has nothing to do with Mr. Bruce.

That gentleman stole on tiptoe through the darkened room, catching a glimpse as he passed the tawdry mirror on the chimneypiece, of a very pale and anxious face strangely unlike his own, while from behind the half-drawn bed-curtains he heard a quiet placid breathing, and a weak, faint voice with its tender whisper, "Charlie, are you there? My darling, I begged so hard to see you for one minute, and—Charlie dear, to—to show you *this*."

This was a morsel of something swathed up in wrappings, round which the young mother's arm was folded with proud, protecting love; but I think he had been too anxious about the woman to feel a proper elation in his new position as father to the child. The tears came

thick to his eyes once more, while he caught the pale, fragile hand that lay so weary and listless on the counterpane, to press it against his lips, his cheeks, his forehead, murmuring broken words of endearment, and gratitude, and joy.

She would have kept him there all night : she would have talked to him for an hour, feeble as she was, of that little being, in so short a time promoted to its sovereignty of Baby (with a capital B), in which she had already discovered instincts, qualities, high reasoning powers, noble moral characteristics : but the doctor's tap was heard, "scratching," as he called it, at the door, and Bruce, too happy not to be docile, had the good sense to obey his summons without delay.

"Let them sleep, monsieur," said the Frenchman, struggling into his great-coat, and hurrying downstairs. "It will do them more good than all your prevision, and all my experience. I will return in the morning, to inquire after madame and to renew my acquaintance with

mademoiselle—I should say with ‘your charming mees.’ Monsieur, you are now father of a family—you should keep early hours. Good-night then—till to-morrow.”

Bruce looked after him with a blessing on his lips, and a fervent thanksgiving in his heart to the Providence that had spared him his treasure. For the moment, I believe, he completely forgot that important personage with whom originated all their anxiety and discomfort. To men, indeed, there is so little individuality about a Baby, that, I fear, it has to be weaned and vaccinated, and to go through many other processes before it ceases to be a thing, and rather an inconvenient one. No; Bruce went to his own sitting-room, with his heart so full of his Nina, there was scarcely place for other considerations; therefore, instead of going to bed, he kicked off his wet boots, turned on a brilliant illumination of gas, and threw himself into an arm-chair—to smoke. After the excitement he had lately passed through, the first few whiffs of his cigar

were soothing and consolatory in the extreme, but reflection comes with tobacco, not less surely than warmth comes with fire ; and soon he began to see the crowd of fresh difficulties which the events of to-night would bring swarming round his devoted head. How he cursed his foolish calculations, his ill-judged caution, his cowardly scruples, thus to have postponed the ceremony of marriage till too late. How impossible it would be now, to throw dust in the eyes of society as to dates and circumstances ! how fruitless the reparation which should certainly be put off no longer, no, not a day ! It seemed so hard that he, of all the world, should have injured the woman who loved him, the woman whom he so devotedly loved in return. He almost hated the innocent baby for its inopportune arrival ; but remembering how that poor little creature too must bear the punishment of his crime, he flung the end of his cigar against the stove with a curse, and for one moment—only one bitter, painful moment—found himself wishing

he had never met, never loved, his darling ; had left the lamb at peace in its fold, the rose ungathered on its stalk.

The clock did not tick twice before there came a reaction. It seemed so impossible that they should be independent of each other. He would not be himself without Nina ! and the flow of his affection, like the back-water of a mill-stream, returned only the stronger for its momentary interruption. After all, Nina was evèrything, Nina was the first consideration. Something must be done at once. As soon as she could bear it, that ceremony must be gone through which should have been performed long ago. He was young, he was impatient, he would fain be at work without delay ; so he turned to his writing-table, and began opening certain letters that had already followed him into France, but that he had laid aside without examination, in the excitement of the last few hours.

They were not calculated to afford him much distraction. A circular from a coal company, a couple of invitations to dinner, a

tailor's bill, and a manifesto from the firm, calling attention to the powers of endurance with which their little account had "made running" for a considerable period, while promising a "lawyer's letter" to enforce payment of the same. Next this hostile protocol lay a business-like missive bearing a Lincoln's Inn look about it not to be mistaken, and which Bruce determined he would leave unopened till the morning, when, if Nina had slept, and was doing well, he felt nothing in the world could make him unhappy.

"Serves me right, though," he yawned, "for deserting Poole. *He* wouldn't have bothered me for a miserable pony at such a time as this;" and flinging off his clothes, in less than five minutes he was as fast asleep as if he had never known an anxiety in the world, but was lulled by the soothing considerations of a well-spent past, an untroubled conscience, and a balance at his banker's!

So he slept, and dreamed not as those sleep who are thoroughly out-wearied in body and

mind, waking only when the sun had been up more than an hour, and the stormy night had given place to a clear, unclouded day.

The Channel was all blue and white now ; the rollers, as they subsided into a long heaving ground-swell, bringing in with them a freight of health and freshness to the shore. The gulls were soaring and screaming round the harbour, edging their wings with gold as they dipped and wheeled in the morning light. Everything spoke of hope and happiness and vitality. Bruce opened his window, drew in long breaths of the keen, reviving air, and stole to listen at Nina's door.

How his heart went up in gratitude to heaven ! Mother and child were sleeping—so peacefully, so soundly. Mother and child ! At that early period the dearest, the sweetest, the holiest link of human love—the gold without the dross, the flower without the insect, the wine without the headache, the full fruition of the feelings without the wear and tear of the heart.

He could have kissed the antiquated French chambermaid, dressed like a Sister of Mercy, who met him in the passage, and wishing “Monsieur” good-morning, congratulated him with tears of honest sympathy in her glittering, bold black eyes. He *did* give a five-franc piece to the alert and well-dressed waiter, who looked as if he had never been in bed, and never required to go. It may be this impulse of generosity reminded him that five-franc pieces were likely to be scarce with him in future, and an unpleasant association of ideas brought the lawyer’s letter to his mind. There it lay, square and uncompromising, between his watch and his cigar-case. He opened it, I am afraid, with a truly British oath.

He turned quite white when he read it the first time, but the blood rushed to his temples on a second perusal, and he flung himself down on his knees at the window-sill, thanking Providence, somewhat inconsiderately, for the benefits that only came to him through another man’s death.

This letter, indeed, though the composition of a lawyer, had not been written at the instance of his long-suffering tailor, but was from the solicitor who conducted the business of his family. It advised him, in very concise language, of his great-uncle's sudden "demise," as it was worded, "intestate;" informing him that he thus became heir, as next of kin, to the whole personal and real property of the deceased, and concluded with sincere congratulations on his accession to a fine fortune, not without a hope that their firm might continue to manage his affairs, and afford him the same satisfaction that had always been expressed by his late lamented relative, &c.

The surprise staggered him like a blow. From such blows, however, we soon "come to time," willing to take any amount of similar punishment. He gave himself credit for self-denial in not waking Nina on the instant to tell her of their good fortune. Still more, he plumed himself on his forethought in resolving to ask her doctor's leave before he entered on

so exciting a topic with the invalid. He longed to tell somebody. He was so happy, so elated, so thankful ! and yet, amidst all his joy, there rankled an uncomfortable sensation of remorse and self-reproach when he thought of the little blighted life, the little injured helpless creature nestling to its young mother's side in the next room.



CHAPTER II.

“NIGHTFALL.”

IT is more than twenty years ago, and yet how vividly it all comes back to him to-night!

The sun has gone down in streaks of orange and crimson over the old oaks that crown the deer-park sloping upward to the rear of Ecclesfield Manor. Mr. Bruce walks across a darkened room to throw the window open for a gasp of fresh evening air, laden with the perfume of pinks, carnations, and moss-roses in the garden below. *Her* garden! Is it possible? Something in the action reminds him of that bright, hopeful morning at Calais. Something

in the scent of the flowers steals to his brain half torpid and benumbed ; his heart contracts with an agony of physical suffering. "My darling ! my darling !" he murmurs, "shall I never see you tying those flowers again ?" and turning from the window, he falls on his knees by the bedside with a passionate burst of weeping that, like blood-letting to the body, restores the unwelcome faculty of consciousness to his mind. When he raises his head again he knows well enough that the one great misfortune has arrived at last—that henceforth for *him* there may come, in the lapse of long years, resignation, even repose, but hope and happiness no more.

Even now, though he wonders at his own callousness, he can bear to look on the bed through a mist of tears ; and, so looking, feels his intellect failing in its effort to grasp the calamity that has befallen him.

There she lies, like a dead lily, his own, his treasure, his beloved ; the sweet face, calm and placid, with its chiselled ivory features, its

smooth and gentle brow, has already borrowed a higher, a more perfect beauty from the immortality on which it has entered. Not fairer, not lovelier did she look that well-remembered evening when he first knew her pure and priceless heart was his own, though she has borne him a daughter—nay, two daughters (and he winces with a fresh and different pain)—the younger as old as she was then. Her raven hair is parted soft and silky off those pale, delicate temples; her long black lashes rest upon the waxen cheek. No; she never looked as beautiful, not in the calm sleep he used to watch so lovingly; and now the deep, fond eyes must open on his own no more. She was so gentle, too, so patient, so sweet-tempered, and oh! so true. He had been a man of the world, neither better nor worse than others: he knew women well; knew how rare are the good ones; knew the prize he had won, and valued it—yes, he was sure he always valued it as it deserved. What was the use? Had she not far better have

been like the others—petulant, wilful, capricious, covetous of admiration, careless of affection, weak-headed, shallow-hearted, and desirous only of that which could not possibly be her own? Such were most of the women amongst whom he had been thrown in his youth; but oh! how unlike her who was lying dead there before his eyes.

“For men at most differ as heaven and earth,
But women, worst and best, as heaven and hell.”

He felt so keenly now that she had been his better angel for more than twenty years; that but for her he might long ago have deteriorated to selfishness and cynicism, or sunk into that careless philosophy which believes only in the tangible, the material, and the present.

A good woman's lot may be linked to that of a bad man; she may even love him very dearly, and yet retain much of her purer, better nature amidst all the mire in which she is steeped; but it is not so with us. To care for a bad woman is to be dragged down to her

level, inch by inch, till the intellect itself becomes sapped in a daily degradation of the heart. From such slavery emancipation is cheap under any suffering, at any sacrifice. The lopping of a limb is a painful process, but above a gangrened wound experienced surgeons amputate without scruple or remorse.

On the other hand, a true woman's affection is of all earthly influences the noblest and most elevating. It encourages the highest and gentlest qualities of man's nature—his enterprise, courage, patience, sympathy, above all, his trust. Happy the pilgrim on whose life such a beacon-star has shone out to guide him in the right way; thrice happy if it sets not until it has lured him so far that he will never again turn aside from the path.

Such reflections as these, while they added to his sense of loss and loneliness, yet took so much of the sting out of Mr. Bruce's great sorrow, that he could realize it for minutes at a time without being goaded to madness or stunned to apathy by the pain.

There had been no warning—no preparation. He had left her that morning as usual, after smoking a cigar in her society on the lawn, while she tied, and snipped, and gathered the flowers of her pretty garden. He had visited the stable, ordered the pony-carriage, seen the keeper, and been to look at an Alderney cow. It was one of his idle days, yet, after twenty years of marriage, such days he still liked to spend, if possible, in the company of his wife. So he strolled back to write his letters in her boudoir, and entered it at the garden door, expecting to find her, as usual, busied in some graceful feminine employment.

Her work was heaped on the sofa; a book she had been reading lay open on the table; the very flowers she gathered an hour ago had the dew on them still. He could not finish his first letter without consulting her, for she kept his memory, his conscience, and his money, just as she kept his heart, so he ran upstairs to her bedroom door and knocked.

There was no answer, and he went in. At

the first glance he thought she must have fainted, for she had fallen on her knees against a high-backed chair, her face buried in its cushions, and one hand touching the carpet. He had a quick eye, and the turn of that grey rigid hand warned him with a stab of something he refused persistently to believe. Then he lifted her on the bed where she lay now, and sent for every doctor within reach.

He had no recollection of the interval that elapsed before the nearest could arrive, nor distinct notion of any part of that long sunny afternoon while he sat by his Nina in the death-chamber. Once he got up to stop the ticking of a clock on the chimneypiece, moving mechanically with stealthy footfall across the room lest she should be disturbed. The doctors came and went, agreeing, as they left the house, that he had answered their questions with wonderful precision and presence of mind; nay, that he was less prostrated by the blow than they should have expected. "Disease of the heart," said they—I believe they called it

“the *pericardium* ;” and after paying a tribute of admiration to the loveliness of the dead lady, discussed the leading article of that day’s “Times” with perfect equanimity. What would you have? There can be but one person in the world to whom another is more than all the world beside.

This person was sitting by Nina’s bed, except for a few brief minutes at a time, utterly stupefied and immovable. Even Maud—his cherished daughter Maud—whose smile had hitherto been welcome in his eyes as the light of morning, could not rouse his attention by the depth of her own uncontrolled grief. He sat like an idiot or an opium eater, till something prompted him to open the window and gasp for a breath of fresh evening air. Then it all came back to him, and he awoke to the full consciousness of his misery.

There are men, though not many, and these, perhaps, the least inclined to prate about it, who have one attachment in their lives to which every other sentiment is but an accessory

and a satellite. Such natures are often very bold to dare, very strong to endure, very difficult to assail, save in their single vulnerable point. Force that, and the man's whole vitality seems to collapse. He does not even make a fight of it, but fails, gives in, and goes down without an effort. Such was the character of Mr. Bruce, and to-day he had gotten his death-blow.

The stars twinkled out faintly one by one, the harvest-moon rose broad and ruddy behind the wooded hill, and still he sat stupefied at the bedside. The door opened gently to admit a beautiful girl, strangely, startlingly like her dead mother, who came in with a cup of tea and a candle. Setting these on the chimney-piece, she moved softly round to where he sat, and pressed his head, with both hands, against her breast.

"Dearest father," said she, "I have brought you some tea. Try and rouse yourself, papa, dear papa, for *my* sake. You love *me* too."

The appeal was well chosen ; once more the

tears came to his eyes, and he woke up as from a dream.

"You are a good girl, Maud," he answered, with a vague, distracted air. "I have my children left—I have my children left! But all the world cannot make up to me for what I have lost!"

She thought his mind was wandering, and tried to recall him to himself.

"We must bear our sorrows as best we may, papa," she answered, very gently. "We must help each other. You and I are alone now in the world."

A contraction, as of some fresh pain, came over his livid face. He raised his head to speak, but, stopping himself with an obvious effort, looked long and scrutinisingly in his daughter's face.

Maud Bruce was a very beautiful girl even now, in the extremity of her sorrow. She had been crying heartily; no wonder, but her delicate features were not swollen, nor her dark eyes dimmed. The silky hair shone smooth

and trim, the muslin dress was not rumpled nor disarranged, and the white hands, with which she still caressed her father's sorrow-laden head, neither shook nor wavered in their office.

With her mother's beauty, Miss Bruce had inherited but little of her mother's character; on the contrary, her nature, like that of her father's ancestors rather than his own, was bold, firm, and self-reliant to an unusual degree. She was hard, and that is the only epithet properly to describe her—manner, voice, appearance, all were lady-like, feminine, and exceedingly attractive; but the self-possession she never seemed to lose, would have warned an experienced admirer, that beneath the white bosom beat a heart not to be reduced by stratagem, nor carried by assault; that he must not hope to see the beautiful dark eyes veil themselves in the dreamy softness which so confesses all it means to hide; that the raven tresses clinging coquetishly to that faultless head were most unlikely to be severed as a tribute of affection for any one whose conquest

would not be a question of pride and profit to their owner. Tenderness was the one quality Maud lacked, the one quality, which, like the zone of Venus, completed all her mother's attractions, with an indefinable and irresistible charm.

There is a wild German legend which describes how a certain woodman, a widower, gave shelter to a strangely fascinating dame, and falling in love with her, incontinently made his guest lawful mistress of hearth and home : how, notwithstanding his infatuated passion, and intense admiration for her beauty, there was yet in it a fierceness which chilled and repelled him, while he worshipped ; how his children could never be brought to look in the fair face of their stepmother without crying aloud for fear ; and how at last he discovered, to his horror and dismay, that he had wedded a fearful creature, half wolf, half woman, combining the seductions of the syren with the cruel voracity of the brute. There was something about Maud Bruce to remind one of that

horrible myth, even now, now at her gentlest and softest, while she clung round a sorrowing father, by the death-bed of one, whom, in their different ways, both had very dearly loved.

It was well that the young lady preserved her presence of mind, for Bruce seemed incapable of connected thought or action. He roused himself, indeed, at his daughter's call, but gazed stupidly about him, stammered in his speech, and faltered in his step when he crossed the room. The shock of grief had evidently overmastered his faculties—something, too, besides affliction, seemed to worry and distress him—something of which he wished to unbosom himself, but that yet he could not make up his mind to reveal. Maud, whose quickness of perception was seldom at fault, did not fail to observe this, and reviewing the position with her accustomed coolness, drew her father gently to the writing-table, and sat down.

“Papa,” said she, “there is much to be done.

We must exert ourselves. It will do us both good. Bargrave can be down by the middle of the day, to-morrow. Let me write for him at once."

Bargrave and Co. were Mr. Bruce's solicitors, as they had been his great-uncle's: it was the same firm, indeed, that had apprised him of his inheritance at Calais twenty years ago. How he rejoiced in their intelligence then! What was the use of an inheritance now?

A weary lassitude had come over him; he seemed incapable of exertion, and shook his head in answer to Maud's appeal; but again some hidden motive stung him into action, and taking his seat at the writing-table, he seized a pen, only to let it slip helplessly through his fingers, while he looked in his daughter's face with a vacant stare.

Maud was equal to the occasion. Obviously something more than sorrow had reduced her father to this state. She sat down opposite, scribbled off a note hastily enough, but in the clear unwavering hand, affirmed by her corre-

spondents to be so characteristic of the writer's disposition, and ringing the bell, desired it should be despatched on the instant. "Let Thomas take the brougham with the ponies; the doctor is sure to be at home. He can bring him back at once."

Then she looked at her father, and stopped the ladies'-maid who, tearful and hysterical, had answered the familiar summons, which but this morning was "missis's bell."

"While they are putting to," said she, calmly, "I will write a telegraphic message and a letter. Tell him to send word when he is ready. I shall give him exactly ten minutes."

Once more she glanced uneasily at Mr. Bruce; what she saw decided her. In half a dozen words she penned a concise message to her father's solicitor, desiring him to come himself or send a confidential person to Ecclesfield Manor, by the very first train, on urgent business; and wrote a letter as well to the same address, explaining her need of immediate assistance, for Mr. Bargrave to receive the

following morning, in case that gentleman should not obey her telegram in person, a contingency Miss Bruce considered highly probable.

The ten minutes conceded to Thomas had stretched to twenty before he was ready; for so strong is the force of habit among stablemen, that even in a case of life and death, horses cannot be allowed to start till their manes are straightened and their hoofs blacked. In the interval, Miss Bruce became more and more concerned to observe no signs of attention on her father's part—no inquiries as to her motives—apparently no consciousness of what she was doing. When the brougham was heard to roll away at a gallop, she came round and put her arm about his neck, where he sat in his chair at the writing-table.

"Papa, dear," she said, "I have told them to get your dressing-room ready. You are ill, very ill. I can see it. You must go to bed."

He nodded, and smiled. Such a weary,

silly smile, letting her lead him away like a little child. He would even have passed the bed where his wife lay without a look, but that his daughter stopped him at the door.

“Papa,” said she—and the girl deserved credit for the courage with which she kept her tears back—“won’t you kiss her before you go?”

It may be some instinct warned her that not in the body was he to look on the face he loved again—that those material lips were never more to touch the gentle brow which in a whole life-time he had not seen to frown—that their next greeting, freed from earthly anxieties, released from earthly troubles, must be exchanged, at no distant period, in heaven.

He obeyed unhesitatingly, imprinting a caress on his dead wife’s forehead, with no kind of emotion, and so left the room, muttering vaguely certain indistinct and incoherent syllables, in which the words “Nina” and “Bargrave” were alone intelligible.

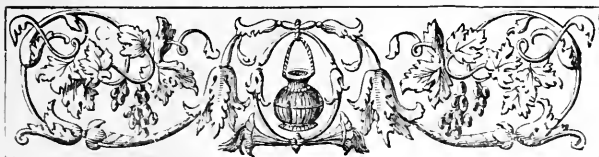
Maud saw her father to his room, and con-

signed him to the hands of his valet, to be put to bed without delay. Then she went to the dining-room, and forced herself to eat a crust of bread, to drink a single glass of sherry. “I shall need all my strength to-night,” thought the girl, “to take care of poor papa, and arrange about the funeral and such matters as he cannot attend to—the funeral! Oh, mother, dear, kind mother! I wasn’t half good enough to you while you were with us, and now—but I won’t cry—I won’t cry. There’ll be time enough for all that by-and-by. The first thing to think of is about papa. He hasn’t borne it well. Men have very little courage when they come to trial, and I fear—I fear, there is something sadly wrong with him. Let me see. Three-quarters of an hour to get to Bragford—five minutes’ stoppage at the turnpike, for that stupid man is sure to have gone to bed—five minutes more for Doctor Skilton to put on his great-coat, forty minutes for coming back, those ponies always go faster towards home. No, he can’t be here

under another hour. Another hour! It's a long time in a case like this. Suppose papa should have a paralytic stroke! And I haven't a notion what to do—the proper remedies, the best treatment. Women ought to know everything, and be ready for everything.

“Then there's the lawyer to-morrow. I don't suppose papa will be able to see him. I must think of all the business—all the arrangements. He can't be here till ten o'clock at the earliest, even if he starts by the first train. I shall write my directions for *him* in the morning. Meantime, I'll go and sit with poor papa, and see if I can't hush him off to sleep.”

But when Miss Bruce reached her father's room, she found him lying in an alarming state of which she had no experience. Something between sleeping and waking, yet without the repose of the one, the consciousness of the other. So she took her place by his pillow, and watched, listening anxiously for the brougham that was to bring the doctor.



CHAPTER III.

TOM RYFE.

AT half-past eight in the morning Mr. Bargrave's office in Gray's Inn was still empty. It had been swept, indeed, and "straightened," as he called it, by a young gentleman, whose duty it was to be in attendance at all hours from sunrise to sunset, when nobody else was in the way, and who fulfilled that duty by slipping out on such available occasions to join the youth of the quarter in sports of clamour, strength, and skill. Just now he was half a mile off in Holborn, running at full speed, shouting at the top of his voice, with no

apparent object but that of exercising his own physical powers and the patience of the general public in his exertions. It was not, therefore, the step of this trusty guardian which fell sharp and quick on the stone stair outside the office, nor was it his hand, nor pass-key, that opened the door to admit Mr. Bargrave's nephew, assistant, and possible successor in the business, Tom Ryfe.

That gentleman entered with the air of a master, looked about him, detected the absence of his young subordinate as one who is disgusted rather than surprised, and lifted two envelopes lying unopened on the table with an oath. "As usual," he muttered, "telegram and letter, same date—same place. Arrive together, of course! Chances are, if there is any hurry you get the letter before the telegram. Halloa! here's a business. Bargrave's sure to be an hour late, and that young scamp not within a mile. If I had my way. Hang it! I *will* have my way. At all events I must manage *this* business my way, for it seems there's not a

moment to spare, and nobody to help me. Dorothe-a!"

The dirtiest woman to be found, probably, at that hour in the whole of London, appeared from a lower story in answer to his summons. Pushing her hair off a grimy forehead with a grimier hand, she listened to his directions, staring vacantly, as is the manner of her kind, but understanding them, nevertheless, and not incapable of remembering their purport: they were short and intelligible enough.

"Tell that young scamp he is to sleep in the office to-night. He mustn't leave it on any consideration while I'm away. I'm going into the country, and I'll break his head when I come back."

Tom Ryfe then huddled the letter into his pocket for perusal at leisure, hailed a hansom, and in less than a quarter of an hour was in his uncle's breakfast-room, bolting ham, muf-fins, and green tea, while his clothes were packed.

Mr. Bargrave, a bachelor, who liked his

comforts, and took care to have them, was reading the newspaper in a silk dressing-gown, and a pair of gold spectacles. He had finished breakfast—such a copious and leisurely repast as is consumed by one who dines at six, drinks a bottle of port every day at dessert, and never smoked a cigar in his life. No earthly consideration would hurry him for the next half-hour. He looked over the top of his newspaper with the placid benignity of a man who, considering digestion one of the most important functions of nature, values and encourages it accordingly.

“Sudden,” observed Mr. Bargrave, in answer to his nephew’s communication. “Something of a seizure, no doubt. Time is of importance; the young lady’s telegram should have come to hand last night. Be so good as to make a note on the back. Three doctors, does she say? Bless me! They’ll never let him get over it. Most unfortunate just now, on account of the child—of the young lady. You can take the necessary instructions. I will follow,

if required. It's twenty-three minutes' drive to the station. Better be off at once, Tom."

So Tom took the hint, and was off. While he drives to the station we may as well give an account of Tom's position in the firm of Bargrave and Co.

Old Bargrave's sister had chosen to marry a certain Mr. Ryfe, of whom nobody knew more than that he could shoot pigeons, had been concerned in one or two doubtful turf transactions, and played a good hand at whist. *While* he lived, though it was a mystery *how* he lived, he kept Mrs. Ryfe "very comfortable," to use Bargrave's expression. When he died he left her nothing but the boy Tom, a precocious urchin, inheriting some of his father's sporting propensities, with a certain slang smartness of tone and manner, acquired in those circles where horseflesh is affected as an inducement to speculation.

Mrs. Ryfe did not long survive her husband. She had married a scamp, and was, therefore, very fond of him ; so before he had been dead

a year, she was laid in the same grave. Then her brother took the boy Tom, and put him into his own business, making him begin by sweeping out the office, and so requiring him to rise grade by grade till he became confidential clerk and head manager of all matters connected with the firm.

At twenty-six years of age, Tom Ryfe possessed as much experience as his principal, joined to a cunning and sharpness of intellect peculiarly his own. To take care of number one was doubtless the head clerk's ruling maxim; but while thus attending to his personal welfare, he never failed to affect a keen interest in the affairs of numbers two, three, four, and the rest. Tom Ryfe was a "friendly fellow," people declared; "a deuced friendly fellow, and knew what he was about, mind you, better than most people."

"Every great man," said the Emperor Nicholas, "has a hook in his nose." In the firmest characters, no doubt, there is a weakness by which they are to be led or driven; and

Tom Ryfe, like other notabilities, was not without this crevice in his armour, this breach in his embattled wall. He had shrewdness, knowledge of the world, common sense, and yet the one great object of his efforts was to be admitted into a class of society far above his own, and to find there an ideal lady with whom to pass the rest of his days.

“I’ll marry a top-sawyer,” he used to say, whenever his uncle broached the question of his settlement in life. “Why, bless ye, it’s the same tackle and the same fly that takes the big fish and the little one. It’s no more trouble to make up to a duchess than a dairymaid. I’ll pick a real white-handed one, you see if I don’t. A wife that can *move*, uncle, cool, and calm, and lofty, like an air balloon; wearing her dresses as if she was made for them, and her jewels as if she didn’t know she’d got them on; looking as much at home in the Queen’s drawing-room as she does in her own. That’s my sort, and that’s the sort I’ll choose! Why, there’s scores of ’em to be seen any afternoon in the

Park. Never tell me I can't go in and take my pick. 'Nothing venture, nothing have,' they say. I ain't going to venture much. I don't see occasion for it, but I'll *have* what I want, you see if I won't, or I'll know the reason why."

Whereon Bargrave, who considered woman-kind in general as an unnecessary evil, would reply—

"Time enough, Tom, time enough. I haven't had much experience with the ladies myself, except as clients, you know. The less I see of 'em, I think, the more I like 'em. Better put it off a little, Tom. It can be done any day, my boy, when you've an hour to spare. I wouldn't be in a hurry if I was you. There's a fresh sample ticketed every year; and they're not like port wine, you must remember, they don't improve with keeping."

Tom Ryfe had plenty of time to revolve his speculations, matrimonial and otherwise, during his journey to Ecclesfield Manor by one of those mid-day trains so irritating to through-

passengers, which stop at intermediate stations, dropping brown-paper parcels, and taking up old women with baskets. He reviewed many little affairs of the heart in which he had lately been engaged, without, however, suffering his affections to involve themselves too deeply for speedy withdrawal. He reflected with great satisfaction on his own fastidious rejection of several "suitable parties," as he expressed it, who did not quite reach his standard of aristocratic perfection, remembering how Mrs. Blades, the well-to-do widow, with fine eyes and a house in Duke Street, had fairly landed him but for that unfortunate dinner at which he detected her eating fish with a knife; how certain grated-looking needle-marks on Miss Glance's left forefinger had checked him just in time while in the act of kissing her hand; and how, on the very eve of a proposal to beautiful Constance De Courcy, whose manner, bearing, and appearance, no less than her name, denoted the extreme of refinement and high birth, he had sustained a shock, galvanic but

salutary, from her artless exclamation, "Oh my! whatever shall I do? If here isn't Pa!"

"No," thought Tom, as he rolled on into the fair expanse of down country that lay for miles round Ecclesfield, "I haven't found one yet quite up to the pattern I require. When I do I shall go in and win, that's all. I don't see why my chance shouldn't be as good as another's. I'm not such a bad-looking chap when I'm dressed and my hair's greased. I can do tricks with cards like winking. I can ride a bit, shoot a bit—'specially pigeons—dance a bit, and make love to 'em no end. I've got the gift of the gab, I know, and I stick at nothing. That's what the girls like, and that's what will pull me through when I find the one I want. Another station, and not there yet! What a slow train this is!"

It was a slow train, and Tom arriving at Ecclesfield, saw on the face of the servant who admitted him that he was too late. In addition to the solemn and mysterious hush that pervades a house in which the dead lie yet un-

buried, a feeling of horror, the result of some unlooked-for and additional calamity, seemed to predominate; and Tom was hardly surprised, however much he might be shocked, when the old butler gasped, in broken sentences, "Seizure—last night—quite unconscious—all over this morning. Will you take some refreshment, sir, after your journey?"

Mr. Bruce had been dead a few hours—dead without time to set his house in order, without consciousness even to wish his child good-bye.

She came down to see Mr. Bargrave's clerk that afternoon, pale, calm, collected, beautiful, but stern and unbending under the sorrow against which her haughty nature rebelled. In a few words, referring to a memorandum the while, she gave him her directions for the funeral and its ceremonies; desired him to ascertain at once the state of her late father's affairs, the amount of a succession to which she believed herself entitled; begged he would return with full information that day fortnight; ordered luncheon for him in the dining-

room; and so dismissed him as a bereaved queen might dismiss the humblest of her subjects.

Tom Ryfe, returning to London by the next train, thought he had never felt so small; and yet, was not this proud, sorrowing, and beautiful young damsel the ideal he had been seeking hitherto in vain? It is not too much to say that for twenty miles he positively *hated* her, striving fiercely against the influence, which yet he could not but acknowledge. In another twenty, his good opinion of his best friend Mr. Ryfe reasserted itself. He had seen something of the world, and possessed, moreover, a certain shallow acquaintance with human nature, not of the highest class, so he argued thus:

“Women like what they are unaccustomed to. The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein makes love to a private soldier simply because she don’t know what a private soldier is. This girl must have lived amongst a set of starched and stuck-up people who have not two ideas

beyond themselves and their order. She has never so much as seen a smart, business-like, active fellow, ready to take all trouble off her hands, and make up her mind for her before she can turn round—young, too, and not so bad-looking, though I dare say she's used to good-looking chaps enough. The man's game who went in for Miss Bruce would be this: constant attention to her interests, supreme disregard for her feelings, and never to let her have her own way for a moment. She'd be so utterly taken aback she'd give in without a fight. Why shouldn't I try my chance? It's a good spec. It must be a good spec. And yet, hang it! such a high-handed girl as that would suit *me* without a shilling. It dashed me a little at first; but I like that scornful way of hers I own. What eyes, too! and what hair! I wonder if I'm a fool. No; nothing's impossible; it's only difficult. What! London already? Ah! there's no place like town."

The familiar gas-lamps, the roll of the cabs,

the bustle in the streets, dispelled whatever shadows of mistrust in his own merits remained from Tom's reflections in the railway carriage; and long before he reached his uncle's house, he had made up his mind to "go in," as he called it, for Miss Bruce, morally confident of winning, yet troubled with certain chilling misgivings, as fearing that *this* time he had really fallen in love.

Many and long, during the ensuing week, were the consultations between old Bargrave and his nephew as to the future prospects of the lady in question. Her father had died without a will. That fact seemed pretty evident, as he had often expressed his intention of preparing such an instrument, but had hitherto moved no further in the matter.

"Depend upon it, Tom," said his uncle, that very evening over their port wine, "he wouldn't go to anybody else. He was never much of a business-man, and he couldn't have disentangled his affairs sufficiently to make 'em clear, except to me. It's a sad pity for many reasons, but

I'm just as sure there's no will as I am that my glass is empty. Help yourself, Tom, and pass the wine."

"Then she takes as next of kin," said Tom, thinking of Maud's dark eyes, and filling his glass. "Here's her health!"

"By all means," assented Bargrave. "Her very good health, poor girl! But as to the succession I have my doubts; grave doubts. There's a trust, Tom. I looked over the deed while you were down there to-day. It is so worded that a male heir might advance a prior claim. There *is* a male heir, a parson in Dorsetshire, not a likely man to give in without a fight. We'll look at it again to-morrow. If it reads as I think, I wouldn't give a pinch of snuff for the young lady's chance."

Tom's face fell. "Can't we fight it, uncle?" said he, stoutly, applying himself once more to the port; but Bargrave had drawn his silk handkerchief over his face, and was already fast asleep.

So uncle and nephew went into the trust-deed, morning after morning, arriving in its perusal at a conclusion adverse to Miss Bruce's interest; but then, as the younger man observed, "the beauty of our English law is, that you can always fight a thing even if you haven't a leg to stand on."

It was almost time for Tom Ryfe's return journey to Ecclesfield, and a coat ordered for the express purpose of captivating Miss Bruce had actually come home, when the post brought him a little note from that lady, which afforded him, as such notes often do, an absurd and overweening joy. It was bordered with the deepest black, and ran as follows:—

"DEAR SIR,

("Dear sir," thought Tom, "ah! that sounds much sweeter than plain sir")—I venture to trouble you with a commission in the nature of business. A packet, containing some diamond ornaments belonging to me, will be left by the jeweller at Mr. Bargrave's

office to-morrow. Will you kindly bring it down with you to Ecclesfield?

“Yours, very obediently,

“MAUD BRUCE.”

Tom kissed the signature. He was very far gone already, and took care to be at the office in time to receive the diamonds. That boy was out of the way, of course! So Tom summoned the grimy Dorothea to his presence.

“I shall be busy for an hour,” said he; “don’t admit anybody unless he comes by appointment, except it’s a man with a packet of jewellery. Take it in yourself, and bring it here at once. I’ve got to carry it down with me to-night by the train. Do you understand?”

“Is it a long journey as you’re a-goin’, sir?” asked Dorothea. “I should like to clean up a-bit while you was away.”

“Only to Bragford,” answered Tom; “but I might not be back for a day or two. Mind about the parcel, though,” he added, in the

exuberance of his spirits. "The thing's valuable. It's for a young lady. It's jewels, Dorothea. It's diamonds!"

"Lor!" said Dorothea, going back to her scrubbing forthwith.

The jeweller, being dilatory, Tom had finished his letters before that artificer arrived, thus saving Dorothea all responsibility in the valuable packet confided to his charge, for Mr. Ryfe received it himself in the outer office, whither he had resorted in a fidget to compare a timetable with a railway map of England. He fretted to set off at once. He had finished his business; he had nothing to do now but eat an early dinner at his uncle's, and so start by the afternoon train on the path of love, triumph, and success, leaving the boy, coerced by ghastly threats, to take charge of the office in his absence.

We have all seen a bird moulting, draggled, dirty, woe-begone, not to be recognized for the same bird, sleek and glossy in its holiday-suit of feathers, pruning its wing for a flight

across the summer-sky. Even so different was the Dorothea of the unkempt hair, the soapy arms, the dingy apron, and the grimy face, from a gaudy damsel who emerged in the afternoon sun out of Mr. Bargrave's chambers, bright with all the colours of the rainbow, and scrupulously dressed, according to the extreme style of the last prevailing fashion but two.

She was a good-looking woman enough now that she had "cleaned herself," as she expressed it, but for a certain roughness of hair, coarseness of skin, and general redundancy of outline, despite of which drawbacks, however, she attracted many admiring glances from cab-drivers, omnibus-conductors, a precocious shoe-black, and the policeman on duty, as she tripped into Holborn and mingled with the living stream that flows unceasingly down that artery of London.

Dorothea seemed to know where she was going well enough, and yet the coarse red cheek turned pale while she approached her goal, though it was but a flashy, dirty-looking

gin-shop, standing at a corner where two streets met. Her colour rose though, higher than before, when a potboy, with a shock of red hair, and his shirt-sleeves rolled up to his shoulders, thus accosted her :

“You’re just in time, miss; he’d ’a been off in a minit, but old Batters, he come in just now, and your young man stopped to take his share of another half-quartern.”



CHAPTER IV.

GENTLEMAN JIM.

THERE is no reason, because a woman is coarse, hard-working, low-born, and badly-dressed, she should be without that inconvenient feminine appendage—a heart. Dorothea trembled and turned pale when the door of the Holborn gin-shop swung open and the man she most wished to see in all the world stood at her side.

He would have been a good-looking fellow enough in any rank of life, but to Dorothea, and others of her class, his clear, well-cut features and jetty ringlets rendered him an absolute Adonis, despite the air of half-drunken

bravado and assumed recklessness which marred a naturally resolute expression of countenance. He wore a fur cap, a velveteen jacket, and a bright-red neckcloth, secured by an enormous ring; nor was this remarkable costume out of character with the perfume he exhaled, denoting he had consumed at least his share of that other half-quartern which postponed his departure.

Dorothea slipped her arm in his, and clung to him with the fond tenacity of a woman who loves heart and soul, poor thing, to her cost.

His manner was an admirable combination of low-class gallantry with pitying condescension.

“Why, Doll,” said he, “what’s up now? You don’t look hearty, my lass. Step in and take a dram; it’ll do you good.”

She glanced admiringly in the comely dissipated face.

“Ah! they may well call you Gentleman Jim,” she answered; “you’re fit to be a lord of the land, you are; and so you would, if I

was queen. But I doesn't want you to treat me, Jim, leastways not this turn; I wants you to come for a walk, dear. I've a bit of news for you. It's business, Jim," she added, somewhat ruefully, "or I wouldn't go for to ask."

His face, which had fallen a little, assuming that wearied expression a woman ought most to dread on the face she cares for, brightened considerably.

"Come on, lass!" he exclaimed, "business first, and pleasure arter. Speak up, and let's hear all about it."

They had turned from the main thoroughfare into a dark and quiet bye-street. She crossed her work-worn hand on his arm, and proceeded nervously—

"You say I never put you on a job, Jim. Well, I've a job to put you on now. I don't half like it, dear. It's for your sake I don't half like it. Promise me as you'll be careful, very careful, this turn."

"Bother!" answered Jim. "Stow that, lass, and let's have it out."

Thus elegantly adjured, Doll, as he called her, obeyed without delay, though her voice faltered and her colour faded more than once while she went on.

“You told me as you wouldn’t love me without I kep’ my ears open, and my eyes too. Well, Jim, I’ve watched and watched old master and young, like a cat watches a mouse-hole, till I’ve been that sick and tired I could have set down and cried. Now, to-day I wanted to see you so bad, at any rate, and, thinks I, here’s a bit of news as my Jim will like to learn. Look, now: young master, he’s a goin’ to a place they call Bragford by the five o’clock train. Oh, I mind the name well enough. You know, Jim, you always bid me take notice of names. Well, it’s Bragford. Bragford, says he, quite plain, an’ as loud as I’m a-speakin’ now.”

“Forty-five miles from London,” answered Jim, “and not ten minutes’ walk from the branch line. Well?”

“He’s a takin’ summut down for a young

lady," continued Doll. "It is but a small package, what you might put in your coat-pocket, or your hat. Oh, Jim! Jim! if you should chance on a stroke of luck this turn, won't you give the trade up for good and all? If you and me had but a roof to cover us, I wouldn't ask better than only liberty to work for you till I dropped."

Tears stood in her eyes, and for a moment the face that looked up into the ruffian's was almost beautiful in its expression of entire devotion and trust.

He had taken a doubtful cigar from his coat-pocket, and was smoking thoughtfully.

"Small," said he, "then it ought, by rights, to be valuable. Did ye get a feel of it, Doll, or was it only a smell?"

"He took it hisself out of the jeweller's hands," answered Doll; "but I hadn't no call to be curious, for he told me what it was free enough. There ain't no smell about diamonds, Jim."

"Nor you can't swear to them neither,"

replied Jim, exultingly. "Diamonds, Doll! you're *sure* he said diamonds? Come, you *have* done it, my lass. Give us a kiss, Doll, and let's turn in here at the Sunflower, and drink good luck to the job."

The woman acceded to both proposals readily enough, but followed her companion into the ill-favoured little tavern with a weary step and a heavy heart. Some unerring instinct told her, no doubt, that she was giving all and taking nothing, offering gold for silver, truth for falsehood, love and devotion for a mere liking, rapidly waning to indifference and contempt.

Tom Ryfe, all anxiety to find himself once more in the same county with Miss Bruce, was in good time, we may be sure, for the train that should carry him down to Ecclesfield. Bustling through the station to take his ticket, he was closely followed by a well-dressed person in a pair of blue spectacles, travelling apparently without luggage or impediments of any description. This individual

seemed also bound for Bragford, and showed some little eagerness to travel in the same carriage with Tom, who attributed the compliment to his lately-constructed coat and general appearance as a swell of the first water. "He don't often get such a chance," thought Mr. Ryfe, accepting with extreme graciousness the other's civilities as to open windows and change of seats. He even went so far as to take a proffered cigar from the case of his fellow-traveller, which he would have smoked forthwith, but for the peremptory objections of a crusty old gentleman, who arrived at the last moment, encumbered with such a paraphernalia of railway-rugs, travelling-bags, books, newspapers and magazines, as denoted the through passenger, not to be got rid of at any intermediate station. The old gentleman glared defiance, but made himself comfortable nevertheless; and the presence of this common enemy was a bond of union to render the two chance acquaintances more than ordinarily cordial and communicative.

Smoking being prohibited, they had not proceeded many miles into the country ere the gentleman in spectacles produced a box of lozenges from his pocket, and, selecting one for his own consumption, offered another, with much suavity, to Tom Ryfe, surveying meanwhile, with inquisitive glances, the bulge in that gentleman's breast-pocket, where he carried his valuable package ; but here again both were startled, not to say irritated, by the dictatorial interference of the last arrival.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," said this irrepressible old man, "I cannot permit it. Damn me, sir !" turning full round upon Tom Ryfe, "I *won't* permit it ! I can detect the smell of chloroform in those lozenges. Smell, sir, I've the smell of a bloodhound. I could hunt a scamp all over England by nose—by nose, I tell you, sir, and worry him to death when I ran into him ; and I *would*, too. Now, sir, if *you* choose to be chloroformed, I don't. I'm not anxious to be taken out of this compartment as stupid as an owl, and as cold as a

cabbage, with a pain in my eyes, a singing in my ears, and a scoundrel's hands in my waistcoat pockets. Excuse me, sir, I'm warm—I wouldn't give much for a chap that wasn't—and I speak my mind!"

It seemed a bad speculation to quarrel with him, this big, burly, resolute, and disagreeable old man. Tom Ryfe, for once, was at a nonplus. He murmured a few vague sentences of dissent, while the passenger in spectacles, consigning his lozenges to an inner pocket, buried himself in the broad sheet of the "Times."

But it was his turn now, and not even thus could he escape. Staring grimly at him, over the top of the paper, his tormentor fired a point-blank question, from which there was no refuge.

"Pray, sir," said he, "are you a chemist?"

The gentleman in spectacles signified, by a shake of the head, that was not his profession.

"Then, sir," continued the other, "do you know anything about chemistry—volatile es-

sences, noxious drugs, subtle poisons? I do.” (Here Tom Ryfe observed his ally turn pale.) “Permit me to remark, sir, that if *you* don’t, you are like a schoolboy carrying a pocketful of squibs and crackers on the fifth of November, unconscious that a single spark may blow him into the Christmas holidays before he can say ‘knife!’ Let me see those lozenges, sir—let me have them in my hand; I’ll tell you in five seconds what they’re made of, and how, and where, and why.”

Here the man in spectacles, with considerable presence of mind, threw the whole of his lozenges out of window, under cover of the “Times.”

“You frighten me, sir,” said he; “I wouldn’t keep such dangerous articles about me on any consideration.”

The old gentleman executed an elaborate wink, denoting extreme satisfaction, at Tom Ryfe. “If you were going through,” said he, “I could tell you some funny stories. Queer tricks upon travellers I’ve seen in my time.

Why I was the first person to find out the sinking floor dodge in West Street. My evidence transported three people for life, and a fourth for fifteen years. I once saw a man pulled down by the heels through a grating in one of the busiest streets in the City, and if I *hadn't* seen him he would never have come up alive. Why the police apply to me for advice many a time when people are missing. 'Don't distress yourselves,' says I, 'they'll turn up, never fear.' And they *do* turn up, sir, in nineteen cases out of twenty. In the twentieth, when there's foul play, we generally know something about it within eight-and-forty hours. Bragford? Is it? You get out here, do you? Good-morning, gentlemen; I hope you've enjoyed your jaunt."

Then as Tom, collecting great-coats, newspapers, &c., followed his new acquaintance out of the carriage, this strange old gentleman detained him for an instant by the arm.

"Friend of yours, sir?" said he, pointing to the man in spectacles on the platform. "Never

saw him before? I thought so. Sharper, sir, I'll take my oath of it, or something worse. I know the sort; I've exposed hundreds of them. Take my advice, sir, and never see him again."

With that the train glided on, leaving Mr. Ryfe and the gentleman in spectacles staring at each other over a basket of fish and a portmanteau.

"Mad!" observed the latter, with an uneasy attempt at a laugh, and a readjustment of his glasses.

"Mad, no doubt," answered Tom, but followed the lunatic's counsel, nevertheless, so far as to refrain from offering the other a lift in the well-appointed brougham, with its burly coachman, waiting to convey him to Ecclesfield Manor, though his late fellow-traveller was proceeding in that direction on foot.

Tom had determined to sleep at the Railway Hotel, Bragford, ere he returned to London next day. This arrangement he considered more respectful than an intrusion on the hospitality of Ecclesfield, should it be offered

him. Perhaps so scrupulous a regard for the proprieties mollified Miss Bruce in his favour, and called forth an invitation to tea in the drawing-room when he had concluded the solitary dinner prepared for him after his journey.

Tom Ryfe was always a careful dresser. Up to forty most men are. It is only when we have nobody to please that we become negligent of pleasing. I believe, though, that never in his life did he tie his neckcloth or brush his whiskers with more care than on the present occasion in a large and dreary chamber known to the household as one of the "best bed-rooms" of Ecclesfield Manor.

Tom looked about him, with a proud consciousness that at last his foot was on the ladder he had wanted all his life to climb. Here he stood, actually dressing for dinner, a welcome guest in the house of an old-established county family, on terms of confidence, if not intimacy, with its proud and beautiful female representative, in whose cause he was about to do battle with all the force of

his intellect, and (Tom began to think she could make him fool enough for anything) all the resources of his purse. The old family pictures—sad daubs, or they would never have been consigned to the bedrooms—simpered down on him with encouraging benignity. Prim women, wearing enormously long waists, and their heads a good deal on one side, pointed their fans at him, while he washed his hands, with a coquetry irresistible, had their colours only stood, combining entreaty and command; while a jolly old boy in flowing wig, steel breastplate, and the most convivial of noses, smiled in his face, as who should say, “*Audaces Fortuna juvat!*—Go in, my hearty, and win if you can!”

What was there in these surroundings, in the orderly decorum of the well-regulated mansion, in the chiming of the stable clock, nay, in the reflection of his own person shown by that full-length glass, to take the starch, as it were, out of Tom’s self-confidence, turning his moral courage limp and helpless for the

nonce, bringing insensibly to his mind the familiar refrain of "Not for Joseph?" What was there that bade him man himself against this discouragement, as true bravery mans itself against the sensation of fear? and why should he be less worthy of approbation than other spirits who venture on "enterprises of great pith and moment" with beating hearts, indeed, but with unflinching courage and a dogged determination to succeed?

Had Tom been a young knight arming for a tournament, in which the good fortune of his lance was to win him a king's daughter for his bride, he might have claimed to be an admirable and interesting hero. Was he, indeed, a less respectable adventurer, that for steel he had to substitute French polish, for surcoat and corslet, broadcloth and cambric—that the battle he was to wage must be fought out by tenacity of purpose and ingenuity of brain, rather than strength of arm and downright hardness of skull?

He shook a little too much scent on his

handkerchief as he finished dressing, and walked down stairs in a state of greater agitation than he would have liked to admit.

Dinner was soon done. Eaten in solitude with grave servants watching every mouthful, he was glad to get it over. In a glass of brown sherry he drank Miss Bruce's health, and thus primed, followed the butler to the drawing-room, where that lady sat working by the light of a single lamp.

The obscurity was in his favour. Tom made his bow and accepted the chair offered him, less awkwardly than was to be expected from the situation.

Maud looked very beautiful with the light falling on her sculptured chin, her fair neck, and white hands, set off by the deep shadows of the mourning dress she wore.

I believe he was going to begin by saying "it had been a fine day," but she stopped him in her clear, cold voice, with its patrician accent, so difficult to define, yet so impossible to mistake.

“I have to thank you, Mr. Ryfe, for taking such care of my jewels. I hope the man left them at your office as he promised, and that you had no further trouble about them.”

He wanted to say that “no errand of hers could be a trouble to *him*,” but the words stuck in his throat, or she would hardly have proceeded so graciously.

“We must go into a few matters of business this evening, if you have got the papers you mentioned. I leave here to-morrow, and there is little time to spare.”

He produced a neatly-folded packet, docketed and carefully tied with tape. The sight of it roused his energies, as the shaking of a guidon rouses an old trooper. Despite of the enchantress and all her glamour, Tom was himself again.

“Business is my trade, Miss Bruce,” said he, briskly. “I must ask your earnest attention for a quarter of an hour, while I explain our position as regards the estate. At present it appears beset with difficulties. That’s my look

out. Before we begin," added Tom, with a diffident faltering of voice, partly natural, partly assumed, "forgive my asking your future address. It is indispensable that we should frequently communicate, and—and—I cannot help hoping and expressing my hope for your happiness in the home you have chosen."

Maud's smile was very taking. She smiled with her eyes, those dark, pleasing eyes that would have made a fool of a wiser man than Tom.

"I am going to Aunt Agatha's," she said. "I am to live with her for good. I have no home of my own now."

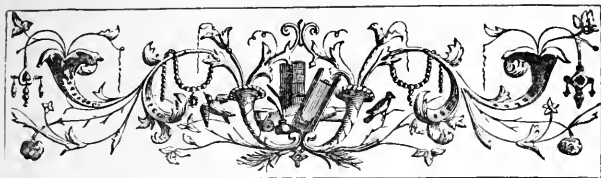
The words were simple enough—spoken, too, without sadness or bitterness as a mere abstract matter of fact, but they aroused all the pen-and-ink chivalry in Tom's nature, and he vowed in his heart to lay goose-quill in rest on her behalf, with the devotion of a Montmorency or a Bayard.

"Miss Bruce," said he, resolutely, "the battle is not yet lost. In our last, of the 15th, we

advised you that the other side had already taken steps to oppose our claims. My uncle has great experience, and I will not conceal from you that my uncle is less sanguine than myself; but I begin to see my way, and if there is a possibility of winning, by hook or by crook, depend upon it, Miss Bruce, win we *will*, for our own sakes, and—and—for *yours*!”

The last two words were spoken in a whisper, being indeed a spontaneous ebullition, but she heard them nevertheless. In her deep sorrow, in her friendless, homeless position there was something soothing and consolatory in the sympathy of this young man, lawyer's clerk though he were, as she insisted with unnecessary repetition to herself. He showed at his best, too, while explaining the legal complications involved in the whole business, and the steps by which he hoped eventually to succeed. Maud was too thoroughly a woman not to admire power, and Tom's intellect possessed obviously no small share of that quality, when directed on such matters as the present. In

half an hour he had furnished her with a lucid statement of the whole case, and in half an hour he had inspired her with respect for his opinion, admiration of his sagacity, and confidence in his strength—not a bad thirty minutes' work. At its conclusion, she shook hands with him cordially when she wished him good-night. Tom was no fool, and knew when to venture as when to hold back. He bowed reverentially over the white hand, muttering only—"God bless you, Miss Bruce! If you think of anything else, at a moment's notice I will come from the end of the world to serve you,"—and so hurried away before she could reply.



CHAPTER V.

THE CRACKSMAN'S CHECKMATE.

PUCKERS, or Miss Puckers, as she liked to be called below-stairs, was a little puzzled by her young mistress's abstraction, while she brushed out Maud's wealth of raven hair for the night. Stealing glances at herself in the glass opposite, she could not help observing the expression on Miss Bruce's face. The light was in it once more that had been so quenched by her father's death. Puckers, who, in the housekeeper's room, had discussed the affairs of the family almost hourly ever since that sorrowful event, considered that it must have left his daughter in the possession

of untold wealth, and that "the young man from town," as she designated Tom Ryfe, was sent down expressly to afford the heiress an estimate of her possessions. A true lady's-maid, she determined to hazard the inquiry.

"I suppose, miss," said she, brushing viciously, "we shan't be going to your aunt's now quite so soon. I'm sure I've been that hurried and put about, I don't scarce know which way to turn."

"Why?" asked Maud, quietly. "Not so hard, please."

"Well, miss, a lady is not like a servant, you know; she can do as she chooses, of course. But if I was *you*, miss, I'd remain on the spot. There's the new furniture to get; there's the linen to see to; there's the bailiff given warning; and that there young man from town, I suppose *he* wouldn't come if we could do without him, charging goodness knows what, as if his very words was gold. But I give you joy, miss, of your fortune, I do. I was a sayin', only last night, was it? to Mrs. Plummer, says

I, 'Whatever *my* young lady will do,' says I, 'in a house where she isn't mistress, she that's been used to rule in her poor ma's time, and her pa's, ah! ever since she cut her teeth almost;' and Mrs. Plummer says, says she ——"

"That'll do, Puckers," observed Miss Bruce, "I shall not want you any more. Good-night."

She took as little notice of her handmaid's volubility as if the latter had been a grey parrot, and dismissed her with a certain cold, imperial manner that none of the household ever dreamt it possible to dispute or disobey; but after Puckers, with a quantity of white draperies over her arm, had departed to return no more, she sat down at the dressing-table, and began to think with all her might.

Her maid was a fool, no doubt: all maids were; but the shaft of folly, shot at random, went home to the quick. "A house where she wasn't mistress!" Had she ever considered the future shelter offered her by Aunt Agatha in that light? Here at the Manor, for as long as she could remember, had she not reigned

supreme? All the little arrangements of dinner-parties, picnics, archery-meetings, and such gatherings as make up country society, had fallen into her hands. Mamma didn't care—mamma never cared how anything was settled so long as papa was pleased; and papa thought Maud could not possibly do wrong. So by degrees—and this at an age when young ladies are ordinarily in the schoolroom—Miss Bruce had grown, on all social questions, to be the virtual head of the family. It was a position of which, till the time came to abdicate, she had not sufficiently appreciated the value. It seemed so natural to order carriages and horses at her own hours, to return visits, to receive guests, to do the honours of a comfortable country-house with an adequate establishment, and now, could she bear to live with Aunt Agatha, on sufferance?—Aunt Agatha, whom she had never liked, and whom she only refrained from snubbing and setting down, because they so seldom met, but when the elder lady had been invited by the younger as a

guest! "To be dependent," thought Maud, mentally addressing the beautiful face in the glass. "How should you like that? *you* with your haughty head, and your scornful eyes, and your hard, unbending heart? I know you! Nobody knows you but me! And I know how *bad* you are—how capricious, and how cruel! When you want anything, do you ever spare anybody to get it? Did you ever love any one on earth as well as your own way? Even mamma? Oh! mamma, dear, dear mamma, if you had lived I might have got better—I *was* better, I know I was better while I was with *you*. But now—now I must be myself. I can't help it. After all, it is not my fault. What is it I most covet and desire in the world? It is power. Rank, wealth, luxury—these are all very well as accessories of life; but how should I loathe and hate them if they were conditional on my thinking, as other people thought, or doing what I was told! I ought to have been a man. Women are such weak, vapid, idiotic characters, in

general—at least, all I meet down here. Engrossed with their children, their parishes, their miserable household cares and perplexities. While in London, I believe there are women who actually lead a party and turn out a minister. But they are beautiful, of course. Well—and me? I don't think I am so much amiss. With my looks and the position I ought to have, surely I might hold my own with the best of them. But what good will my looks do me if I am to be a dependent on Aunt Agatha? No. Without the estate I am nothing. With it I might be *anything*. This lawyer thinks he can win it for me. I wonder if he knows. How clever he seems! and how thoughtful! Nothing escapes him, and nothing seems to take him by surprise. And yet what a fool I could make of him if I chose. I saw it before he had been five minutes in the room. I wonder now what he thinks of *me*!—whether he has the presumption to suppose I could ever allow him to betray what he cared for me. I believe I should rather admire

his impudence ! It is pleasant to be cared for, even by an inferior ; and, after all, this Mr. Ryfe is not without his good points. He has plenty of talent and energy, and I should think audacity. By his own account he sticks at nothing, when he means winning, and he certainly means to win for me if he can. I never saw anybody so eager, so much in earnest. Perhaps he thinks that if he could come to me and say, ‘ There, Miss Bruce, I have saved your birthright for you, and I ask nothing but one kind word in return,’ I might be disposed to give it, and something more. Well, I don’t know. Perhaps it would be as good a way as any other of getting into favour. One thing is certain. The inheritance I must preserve at every sacrifice. Dear me, how late it is ! I ought to have been in bed hours ago. Puckers, is that you ?”

Puckers did not answer, and a faint rustle in the adjoining room, which had called forth Miss Bruce’s question, ceased the instant she spoke aloud.

This young lady was not nervous ; far from it ; yet her watch seemed to tick with extraordinary vigour, and her heart to beat harder than common while she listened.

The door of communication between the two rooms was closed. Another door in the smaller apartment opened to the passage, but this, she remembered, was habitually locked on the inside. It couldn't be Puckers, therefore, who thus disturbed her mistress's reflections, unless that handmaiden had come down the chimney, or in at the window.

In this smaller room Miss Bruce kept her riding-habits, her ball-dresses, her draperies of different fabric, her transparencies of all kinds, and her jewels.

The house was very silent—so silent, that in the distant corridors were distinctly audible those faint and ghostly footfalls, which traverse all large houses after midnight. There were candles burning on Maud's toilet-table, but they served rather to show how dismal were the shadowy corners of the large, lofty bed-

room, than to afford light and confidence to its inmate.

She listened intently. Yes; she was sure she heard somebody in the next room—a step that moved stealthily about; a noise as of wood-work skilfully and cautiously forced open.

One moment she felt frightened. Then her courage came back the higher for its interruption. She could have escaped from her own room into the passage, easily enough, and so alarmed the house; but when she reflected that its fighting garrison consisted only of an infirm old butler—for the footman was absent on leave—there seemed little to be gained by such a proceeding, if violence or robbery were really intended. Besides, she rather scorned the idea of summoning assistance till she had ascertained the amount of danger.

So she blew her candle out, crept to the door of the little room, and laid her hand noiselessly on its lock.

Softly as she turned it, gently as she pushed the door back on its hinges inch by inch, she

did not succeed in entering unobserved. The light of a shaded lantern flashed over her the instant she crossed the threshold, dazzling her eyes indeed, yet not so completely but that she made out the figure of a man standing over her shattered jewel-box, of which he seemed to have been rifling the contents. Quick as thought, she said to herself, "Come, there is only one! If I can frighten *him* more than he frightens *me*, the game is mine."

The man swore certain ghastly oaths in a whisper, and Maud was aware of the muzzle of a pistol covering her above the dark lantern.

She wondered why she wasn't frightened, not the least frightened—only rather angry and intensely determined to save the jewels, and have it out.

She could distinguish a dark figure behind, the spot of intense light radiating round her own person, and perceived, besides, almost without looking, that an entrance had been made by the window, which stood wide open to disclose the topmost rounds of a garden-

ladder, borrowed doubtless from the tool-house, propped against its sill.

What the housebreaker saw was a vision of dazzling beauty in a flood of light. A pale, queenly woman, with haughty, delicate face, and loops of jet-black hair, falling over robes of white, erect and dauntless, fronting his levelled weapon without the slightest sign of fear.

He had never set eyes on such a sight as this; no, neither in circus nor music-hall, nor gallery of metropolitan theatre at Christmas. For a moment he lost his head—for a moment he hesitated.

In that moment Miss Bruce showed herself equal to the occasion.

Quick as thought, she made one step to the window, pushed the ladder outwards with all her force, and shut down the sash. As it closed, the ladder, poising for an instant, fell with a crash on the gravel below.

"Now," she said, quietly, "you are trapped and taken. Better make no resistance, for the

gamekeepers watching below are a rough sort of people, and I do not wish to see you ill-treated."

The man was aghast! What could it all mean? Was he awake or dreaming? She must be well backed, he said to himself, to assume such a position as this; and she looked so beautiful—so beautiful!

The latter consideration was not without its effect on him, even in the exercise of his profession. "Gentleman Jim," as his mates affirmed in their nervous English, became a fool of the deepest crimson dye whenever a woman was concerned, and this woman was in his eyes as an angel of light.

Nevertheless, instinctively rather than of intention, he muttered hoarsely—

"Drop it, miss, I warn you. One word out loud and I'll shoot, as sure as you stand there."

"Shoot away!" she answered with perfect composure; "you will save me the trouble of giving an alarm. They expect it, and are

waiting for it every moment below stairs. Light those candles, and let us see what damage you have done before you return the plunder."

A pair of wax-candles stood on the chimney-piece, and he obeyed mechanically, wondering at himself the while. His cunning, however, had not entirely deserted him, and he left his pistol lying on the table, ready to snatch it away if she tried to take possession. It was thus he gauged her confidence, and seeing she scarcely noticed the weapon, argued that powerful assistance must be near at hand to render this beautiful young lady so arbitrary and so unconcerned. His admiration burst out in spite of his discomfiture and critical position.

"Well, you *are* a cool one!" he exclaimed, in accents of mingled vexation and approval. "A cool one and a stunner, I'm blessed if you ain't! No offence, but I never see your likes yet, not since I was born. Come, miss, let's cry quits. You pass me out o' this on the

quiet. I dessay as I can make shift to get down without the ladder, an' I'll leave all these here gimcracks just as I found 'em. Now I've seen ye once, I'm biessed if I'd take so much as an ear-drop, unless it was in the way of a keepsake. Pass me out, miss, and I'll promise—no, I'm blowed if I think as I *can* promise—never to come here no more.”

Undisguised admiration—the admiration always acceptable to a woman when accompanied with respect—shone in Gentleman Jim's dark eyes. He seemed under a spell, and while he acknowledged its strength, had no power, nay, had no wish, to resist its influence. When on such jobs as these it was his habit to observe an unusual sobriety. He was glad now to think of his adherence to that rule. Had he been drunk, he might, peradventure, have insulted this divinity. What had come over him? He felt almost pleased to know he was in her power, and yet she treated him like the dirt beneath her feet.

“No insolence, sir,” she said, in a command-

ing voice. "Let me see, first of all, that every one of my trinkets is in its place. There, that bracelet would have brought you money; those diamonds would have been valuable if you could have got them clear off. You must have learned your trade very badly to suppose that with such things in the house we keep no guard. Come, I am willing to believe that distress brought you to this. Listen. You are in my power, and I will show you mercy. If I give you five pounds now, on the spot, and let you go, will you promise to try and get your bread as an honest man?"

The tears came in his eyes. This woman, then, that looked so like an angel, was angel all through. Yet, touched as he felt in his better nature, the proletary instinct bade him try once more if her effort to get rid of him originated in pity or fear, and he muttered, "Guineas! make it guineas, miss, and I'll say 'done.'"

"Not a shilling more, not a farthing," she answered, moving her hand as if to put it on

the bell-pull. "It cannot matter to me," she added, in a tone of the most complete indifference, "but while I am about it I think I would rather be the making of an honest man than the destruction of a rogue."

Her acting was perfect. She seemed so cold, so impassive, so completely mistress of the position, and all the time her heart was beating as the gambler's beats albeit in winning vein, ere he lifts the box from off the imprisoned dice—as the lion-tamer's beats while he spurns in its very den the monster that could crush him with a movement, and that yet he holds in check by an imaginary force, irresistible only so long as it is unresisted.

Such situations have a horrible fascination of their own. I have even known them prolonged to gratify a morbid thirst for excitement; but I think Miss Bruce was chiefly anxious to be released from her precarious position, and to get rid of her visitor as soon as she could. Even her resolute nerves were beginning to give way, and she knew her

own powers well enough to mistrust a protracted trial of endurance. Feminine fortitude is so apt to break down all at once, and Miss Bruce, though a courageous specimen of her sex, was but a woman who had wrought herself up for a gallant effort, after all.

She was quite unprepared though for its results. Gentleman Jim snatched up his pistol, stowed it away in his breast-pocket, as if heartily ashamed of it, brought out from that receptacle a pearl necklace and a pair of coral ear-rings, dashed them down on the table with an imprecation, and looking ridiculously sheepish, thus delivered himself—

“Five pounds, miss! Five devils! If ever I went for to ask five shillings of you, or five fardens, may the hands rot off at my wrists and the teeth drop out of my head. Strike me blind, now, this moment, in this here room, if I’d take so much as a pin’s head that you valued, not if my life depended on it and there wasn’t no other way of getting a morsel of bread! Look ye here, miss. No offence;

I'm but a rough-and-ready chap and you're a lady. I never come a-nigh one afore. Now I know what they mean when they talk of a real lady, and I see what it is puts such a spirit into them swells as lives with the likes of you. But a rough chap needn't be a blind chap. I come in here for to clean out your jewel-box. I tell ye fair, I don't think as I meant to have ill-treated you, and now I know as I *couldn't* have done it, but I wanted them gimcracks just the same. If so be as you'd like to see me shopped and lagged, you take and ring that there bell, and look if I go for to move a foot from this blessed spot. There! If so be as you bid me walk out free from that there winder, take and count these here now at once, and see there's not one missing and not one broke. Say the word, miss—which is it to be?"

The reaction was coming on fast. Maud dared not trust her voice, but she pointed to the window with a gesture in which she preserved an admirable imitation of confidence

and command. Gentleman Jim threw up the sash, but paused ere he ventured his plunge into the darkness outside.

“Look ye ere, miss,” he muttered in a hoarse whisper with one leg over the ledge, “if ever you wants a chap to do you a turn, don’t ye forget there’s one inside this waistcoat as will take a leap in a halter any day to please ye. You drop a line to ‘Gentleman Jim’ at the Sunflower, High Holborn. ‘Oh! I can read, bless ye, and write and cipher too. What I says I sticks to. No offence, miss. I wonder will I ever see you again?’”

He darted back for an instant, much to Maud’s dismay, snatched a knot of ribbon which had fallen from her dress on the carpet, and was gone.

She heard his leap on the gravel below, and his cautious footsteps receding towards the park. Then she passed her hands over her face and looked about her as one who wakes from a dream.

“It was an escape I suppose,” she said, “and

I ought to have been horribly frightened; yet I never seemed to lose the upper hand with him for a moment. How odd that even a man like that should be such a fool! No wiser and no cooler than Mr. Ryfe. What is it, I wonder; what is it, and how long will it last?"



CHAPTER VI.

A REVERSIONARY INTEREST.

ALTHOUGH Dorothea could assume on occasions so bright an exterior as I have in a previous chapter endeavoured to describe, her normal state was undoubtedly that which is best conveyed by the epithet "grimy." Old Mr. Bargrave, walking serenely into his office at eleven, and meeting this handmaiden on the stairs, used to wonder how so much dirt could accumulate on the human countenance, when irrigated, as Dorothea's red eyelids too surely testified, by daily tears. Yes, she had gone about her work of late with a heavy heart and a moody brow. Hers was at

best a dull, dreary life, but in it there grew a noxious weed which she was pleased to cherish for a flower. Well, it was withering every day before her eyes, and all the tears she could shed were not enough to keep it alive. Ah! when the ship is going down under our very feet, I don't think it much matters what may be our rank and rating on board. The cook's mate in the galley is no less dismayed than the admiral in command. Dorothea's light, so to speak, was only a tallow-candle, yet to put it out was to leave the poor woman very desolate in the dark. So Mr. Bargrave ventured one morning to ask if she felt quite well; but the snappish manner in which his inquiries were met, as though they masked a load of hidden sarcasm and insult, caused the old gentleman to scuffle into his office with unusual activity, much disturbed and humiliated, while resolved never so to commit himself again.

Into that office we must take the liberty of following him, tenanted as it is only by himself and Tom Ryfe.

The latter, extremely well dressed, wears a posy of spring flowers at his buttonhole, and betrays in his whole bearing that he is under some extraneous influence of an unbusiness-like nature. Bargrave subsides into his leather chair with a grunt, shuffles his papers, dips a pen in the inkstand, and looks over his spectacles at his nephew.

“Waste of time, waste of capital, Tom,” says he, with some irritation. “Mind, I washed *my* hands of it from the first. You’ve been at work now for some months; that’s *your* look-out, and it’s been kept apart and separate from the general business—that’s *mine*.”

“I’ve got Tangle’s opinion here,” answered Tom; “I won’t ask you to look at it, uncle. He’s dead against us. Just what you said six months back. There’s no getting over that trust-deed, nor through it, nor round it, nor any way to the other side of it. I’ve done *my* d—dest, and we’re not a bit better off than when we began.”

He spoke in a cheerful, almost an exulting tone, quite unlike a man worsted in a hard and protracted struggle.

“I’m sorry for the young lady,” observed Bargrave, “but I never expected anything else. It’s a fine estate and it must go to the male heir. She has but a small settlement, Tom, very inadequate to her position, as I told poor Mr. Bruce many a time. He used to say everything would be set right by his will, and now one of these girls is left penniless, and the other with a pittance, a mere pittance, brought up, as I make no doubt she was, to believe herself an heiress.”

“One of them!” exclaimed Tom. “What do you mean?”

“Why, that poor thing who was born a few weeks too soon,” answered Bargrave. “She’s totally unprovided for. With regard to Miss Bruce, there is a settlement. Two hundred a year, Tom, for life, nothing more. I told you so when you undertook the job. And now who’s to pay your costs?”

“Not you, uncle,” answered Tom, flippantly, “so don’t distress yourself on that score.”

“I don’t, indeed,” observed Bargrave, with emphasis. “You’ve had your own time to work this, on the understanding, as you know, that it was to be worked at your own risk. I haven’t interfered; it was no affair of mine. But your costs will be heavy, Tom, I can’t help seeing that. Tangle’s opinion don’t come so cheap, you see, though it’s word for word the same as mine. I would have let *you* have it for nothing, and anybody else for six and eight-pence.”

“The costs *will* be heavy,” answered Tom, still radiant. “I should say a thou. wouldn’t cover the amount. Of course, if we can’t get them from the estate, they must come out of my pocket.”

Bargrave’s eyebrows were raised. How the new school went ahead, he thought. Here was this nephew of his talking of a thousand pounds with an indifference verging on contempt. Well, that was Tom’s look-out; never-

theless, on such a road it would be wise to establish a halting-place, and his tone betrayed more interest than common while he asked—

“You won’t take it into Chancery, Tom, will you?”

The younger man laid his forefinger to the side of his nose, winked thrice with considerable energy, lifted his hat from its peg, adjusted his collars in the glass, nodded to his uncle, muttering briefly, “Back in two hours,” and vanished.

Old Bargrave looked after him with a grim, approving smile. “Boy or man,” said he, aloud, “that chap always knew what he was about. Tom can be safely trusted to take care of Number One.”

He was wrong, though, on the present occasion. If Mr. Ryfe did indeed know what he was about, there could be no excuse for the enterprise on which he had embarked. He was selfish. He would not have denied his selfishness, and indeed rather prided himself on that quality; yet behold him now waging a

contest in which a man wastes money, time, comfort, and self-respect, that he may wrest from real sorrow and discomfiture the shadow of a happiness which he cannot grasp when he has reached it. There is much wisdom in the opinion expressed by a certain fox concerning grapes hanging out of distance ; but it is a wisdom seldom acquired till the limbs are too stiff to stretch for an effort—till there is scarce a tooth left in the mumbling jaws to be set on edge.

Tom Ryfe had allowed his existence to merge itself in another's. For months, as devotedly as such natures can worship, he had been worshipping his ideal in the person of Miss Bruce. I do not say that he was capable of that highest form of adoration which seeks in the first place the unlimited sovereignty of its idol, and which, as being too good for them, women constantly undervalue ; but I do say that he esteemed his fair client the most beautiful, the most attractive, and the most perfect of her sex, resolving that for him she

was the only woman in the world, and that in defiance of everything, even her own inclinations, he would win her if he could.

In Holborn there is always a hansom to be got at short notice. "Grosvenor Crescent," says Tom, shutting the half-doors with a bang, and shouting his orders through the little hole in the top. So to Grosvenor Crescent he is forwarded accordingly, at the utmost speed attainable by a pair of high wheels, a well-bred "screw," and a rough-looking driver with a flower in his mouth.

There are several peculiarities, all unreasonable, many ridiculous, attending the demeanour of a man in love. Not the least eccentric of these are his predatory instincts, his tendency to prowl, his preference for walking over other modes of conveyance, and his inclination to subterfuge of every kind as to his ultimate destination. Tom Ryfe was going to Belgrave Square; why should he direct his driver to set him down a quarter of a mile off? why overpay the man by a shilling? why wear down the

soles of an exceedingly thin and elaborate pair of boots on the hot, hard pavement without compunction? Why? Because he was in love. This was also the reason, no doubt, that he turned red and white when he approached the square railings; that his nose seemed to swell, his mouth got dry, his hat felt too tight, and the rest of his attire too loose for the occasion; also that he affected an unusual interest in the numbers of the doors, as though meditating a ceremonious morning call, while all the time his heart was under the laburnums in the centre of the square gardens, at the feet of a haughty, handsome girl, dressed in half-mourning, with the prettiest black-laced parasol to be found on this side of the Rue Castiglione, for love—of which, indeed, as the gift of Mr. Ryfe, it was a type—or money, which, not having been yet paid for, it could hardly be said to represent.

That heart of his gave a bound when he saw it in her hand as she sailed up the broad gravel-walk to let him in. He was almost

happy, poor fellow, for almost a minute, not distressing himself to observe that the colour never deepened a shade on her proud, pale cheek ; that the shapely hand, which fitted its pass-key to the lock, was firm as a dentist's, and the clear, cold voice that greeted him far steadier than his own.

It is a choice of evils, after all, this favourite game of cross-purposes for two. To care more than the adversary entails worry and vexation ; to care less makes a burthen of it, and a bore.

"Thank you so much for coming, Miss Bruce—Maud," said Tom, passionately. "You never fail, and yet I always dread, somehow, that I shall be disappointed."

"I keep my word, Mr. Ryfe," answered the young lady, with perfect self-possession ; "and I am quite as anxious as you can be, I assure you. I want so to know how we are getting on."

He showed less discouragement than might have been expected. Perhaps he was used to this *sang-froid*, perhaps he rather liked it, believing it, in his ignorance, a distinctive mark

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of class, not knowing—how should he?—that, once excited, these thoroughbred ones are, of all racers, the least amenable to restraint.

“I have bad news, he said,” tenderly. “Miss Bruce, I hardly like to tell you that I fear we cannot make out case enough to come into court. I took the opinion of the first man we have. I am sorry to say he gives it against us. I am not selfish,” he added, with real emotion, “and I am sorry, indeed, for your sake, dearest Miss Bruce.”

He meant to have called her “Maud;” but the beautiful lips tightened, and the delicate eyebrows came down very straight and stern over the deep eyes in which he had learned to read his fate. He would wait for a better opportunity, he thought, of using the dear, familiar name.

She took small notice of his trouble.

“Has there been no mismanagement?” she asked, almost angrily; “no papers lost? no foul play? Have you done your best?”

“I have, indeed,” he answered, meekly.

“After all, is it not for my own interest as much as yours? Are they not henceforth to be in common?”

She ignored the question altogether; she seemed to be thinking of something else. While they paced up and down a walk screened from the square windows by trees and shrubs already clothed in the tender, quivering foliage of spring, she kept silence for several seconds, looking straight before her with a sterner expression than he could yet remember to have seen on the face he adored. Presently she spoke in a hard, determined voice—

“I *am* disappointed. Yes, Mr. Ryfe, I don’t mind owning I am bitterly and grievously disappointed. There, I suppose it’s not your fault, so you needn’t look black about it; and I dare say you did the best you could afford at the price. Well, I don’t want to hurt your feelings—your *very* best, then. And yet it seems very odd—you were so confident at first. Of course if the thing’s really gone, and there’s no chance left, it’s folly to think about it. But

what a future to lose—what a future to lose! Mr. Ryfe, I can't stay with Aunt Agatha—I can't and I won't! How she could ever find anybody to marry her! Mr. Ryfe, speak to me. What had I better do?"

Tom would have given a round sum of money at that moment to recall one of the many imaginary conversations held with Miss Bruce, in which he had exhausted poetry, sentiment, and forensic ardour for the successful pleading of his suit. Now he could find nothing better to say than that "he had hoped she was comfortable with Mrs. Stanmore; and anybody who didn't make Miss Bruce comfortable must be brutal and wicked. But—but—if it was really so—and she could be persuaded—why, Miss Bruce must long have known—" And here the voice of Tom, the plausible, the prudent, the self-reliant, degenerated to a husky whisper, because he felt that his very heart was mounting to his throat.

Miss Bruce cut him exceedingly short.

"You remember our bargain," she said,

bitterly. "If you don't, I can remind you of it. Listen, Mr. Ryfe; I am not going to cheat you out of your dues. You were to win back my fortune from the next of kin—this cousin who seems to have law on his side. You charged yourself with the trouble—that counts for nothing, it is in the way of your business—with the costs—the expenses—I don't know what you call them—these were to be paid out of the estate. It was all plain sailing, if we had conquered; and there was an alternative in the event of failure. I accepted it. But I tell you, not till every stratagem has been tried, every stone turned, every resource exhausted, do I acknowledge the defeat, nor—I speak plain English, Mr. Ryfe—do I pay the penalty."

He turned very pale. "You did not use this tone when we walked together through the snow in the avenue at Ecclesfield. You promised of your own accord, you know you did," said poor Tom, trembling all over; "and I have got your promise in writing locked up in a tin box at home."

She laughed a hard, shrill laugh, not without some real humour in it, at his obvious distress.

“Keep it safe in your tin box,” said she, “and don’t be afraid, when the time comes, that I shall throw you over. Ah! what an odd thing money is; and how it seems able to do everything!” She was looking miles away now, totally unconscious of her companion’s presence. “To me this five or six thousand a year represents hope, enjoyment, position—all that makes life worth having. More, to lose it is to lose my freedom, to lose all that makes life endurable!”

“And you *have* lost it,” observed Tom, doggedly. He was very brave, very high-minded, very chivalrous in any way; but he possessed the truly British quality of tenacity, and did not mean to be shaken off by any feminine vagaries where once he had taken hold.

“Et je payerais de ma personne,” replied Miss Bruce, scornfully. “I don’t suppose you know any French. You must go now,

Mr. Ryfe; my maid's coming back for me from the bonnet-shop. I can't be trusted, you see, over fifty yards of pavement and a crossing by myself. The maid is walking with me now behind these lilac-bushes you know. Her name is Ryfe. She is very cross and silent; she wears a well-made coat, shiny boots, rather a good hat, and carries a nosegay as big as a chimney-sweep's—you can give it me if you like—I dare say you bought it on purpose."

How she could twist and turn him at will! three or four playful words like these, precious all the more that her general manner was so haughty and reserved, caused Tom to forget her pride, her whims, her various caprices, her too palpable indifference to himself. He offered the flowers with humble gratitude, ignoring resolutely the presumption that she would probably throw them away before she reached her own door.

"Good-bye, Miss Bruce," said he, bowing reverently over the slim hand she vouchsafed him, and "Good-bye," echoed the young lady,

adding, with another of those hard little laughs that jarred so on Tom's nerves, "Come with better news next time, and don't give in while there's a chance left; depend upon it the money's better worth having than the client. By-the-by, I sent you a card for Lady Goldthred's this afternoon—only a stupid breakfast—Did you forget it?"

"Are you going?" returned Tom, with the clouds clearing from his brow.

"Perhaps we shall, if it's fine," was the reply. "And now I can't wait any longer. Don't forget what I told you, and do the best you can."

So Tom Ryfe departed from his garden of Eden with sundry misgivings not entirely new to him, that the fruit he took such pains to ripen for his own gathering might but be gaudy wax-work after all, or painted stone, perhaps, cold, smooth, and beautiful, against which he should rasp his teeth in vain.

The well-tutored Puckers, dressed in faded splendour, and holding a brown-paper parcel

in her hand, was waiting for her young lady at the corner of the square.

While thus engaged she witnessed a bargain, of an unusual nature, made apparently under extraordinary pressure of circumstances. A ragged boy, established at the crossing, who had indeed rendered himself conspicuous by his endeavours to ferry Puckers over dry-shod, was accosted by a shabby-genteel and remarkably good-looking man in the following vernacular—

“On this minnit, off at six, Buster; Two bob an’ a bender, and a three of eye-water, in?”

“Done for another joey,” replied Buster, with the premature acuteness of youth foraging for itself in the streets of London.

“Done,” repeated the man, pulling a handful of silver from his pocket, and assuming the broom at once to enter on his professional labours, ere Puckers had recovered from her astonishment, or Buster could vanish round the corner in the direction of a neighbouring mews.

Though plying his instrument diligently, the

man kept a sharp eye on the square gardens. When Tom Ryfe emerged through the heavy iron gate he whispered a deep and horrible curse, but his dark eyes shone and his whole face beamed into a ruffianly kind of beauty, when after a discreet pause, Miss Bruce followed the young lawyer through the same portal. Then the man went to work with his broom harder than ever. Not Sir Walter Raleigh spreading his cloak at the feet of his sovereign mistress lest they should take a speck of mud could have shown more loyalty, more devotion, than did Gentleman Jim sweeping for bare life, as Miss Bruce and her maid approached the crossing he had hired for the occasion.

Maud recognized him at a glance. Not easily startled or surprised, she bade Puckers walk on, while she took a half-crown from her purse and put in the sweeper's hand.

"At least it is an honest trade," said she, looking him fixedly in the face.

The man turned pale while he received her bounty.

“It’s not that, Miss,” he stammered. “It’s not that—I only wanted to get a look of ye. I only wanted just to hear the turn of your voice again. No offence, Miss, I’ll go away now. Oh! can’t ye give a chap a job? It’s my heart’s blood as I’d shed for you, free—and never ask no more nor a kind word in return!”

She looked him over from head to foot once more and passed on. In that look there was neither surprise, nor indignation, nor scorn, only a quaint and somewhat amused curiosity, yet this thief and associate of thieves, quivered, as if it had been a sun-stroke. When she passed out of sight he bit the half-crown till it bent, and hid it away in his breast. “I’ll never part with ye,” said he, “never;” unmindful of poor Dorothea, going about her work tearful and forlorn. Gentleman Jim, uneducated, besotted, half-brutalized as he was, had yet drunk from the cup that poisons equally the basest and noblest of our kind. A well-dressed, good-looking young man, walking on the other side of the square, did not fail to

witness Tom Ryfe's farewell and Maud's interview with the crossing-sweeper. He too looked strangely disturbed, pacing up and down an adjoining street more than once, before he could make up his mind to ring a well-known bell. Verily Miss Bruce seemed to be one of those ladies whose destiny it is to puzzle, worry, and interest every man with whom they come in contact.



CHAPTER VII.

DICK STANMORE.

SHE had certainly succeeded in puzzling Dick Stanmore and already began to interest him. The worry would surely follow in due time. Dick was a fine subject for the scalpel — good-humoured, generous, single-hearted, with faultless digestive powers, teeth, and colour to correspond, a strong tendency to active exercise, and such a faculty of enjoyment, as, except in the highest order of intellects, seldom lasts a man over thirty.

Like many of his kind, he *said* he hated London, but lived there very contentedly from April to July, nevertheless. He was fresh, just

at present, from a good scenting season in Leicestershire, followed by a sojourn on the Tweed, in which classical river he had improved many shining hours, wading waist-deep under a twenty-foot rod, any number of yards of line, and a fly of various hues, as gaudy, and but little smaller than a cock pheasant. Now he had been a week in town, during which period he met Miss Bruce at least once every day. This constant intercourse is to be explained in a few words.

Mrs. Stanmore, the Aunt Agatha with whom Maud expressed herself so unwilling to reside, was a sister of the late Mr. Bruce. She had married a widower with one son, that widower being old Mr. Stanmore, defunct, that son being Dick. Mrs. Stanmore, in the enjoyment of a large jointure (which rather impoverished her step-son), though arbitrary and unpleasant, was a woman of generous instincts, so offered Maud a home the moment she learned her niece's double bereavement; which home, for many reasons, heiress or no heiress, Miss Bruce

felt constrained to accept. Thus it came about that she found herself walking with Tom Ryfe *en cachette* in the Square gardens ; and, leaving them, recognized the gentleman whom she was to meet at luncheon in ten minutes, on whose intellect at least, if not his heart, she felt pretty sure she had already made an impression.

“I won’t show her up,” said Tom to his neatest boots, while he scraped them at his mother’s door ; “but I *should* like to know who that bumptious-looking chap is, and what the h-ll she could have to say to him in the Square gardens all the same.”

Mr. Stanmore’s language at the luncheon-table, it is needless to say, was far less emphatic than that which relieved his feelings in soliloquy ; nor was he to-day quite so talkative as usual. His mother thought him silent (he always called her “mother,” and, to do her justice, she could not have loved her own son better, nor scolded him oftener, had she possessed one) ; Miss Bruce voted him stupid and sulky. She told him so.

“A merrythought, if you please, and no bread sauce,” said the young lady, in her calm, imperious manner. “Don’t forget I hate bread sauce, if you mean to come here often to luncheon; and do *say* something. Aunt Agatha can’t, no more can I. Recollect we’ve got a heavy afternoon before us.”

Aunt Agatha always contradicted. “Not heavier than any other breakfast, Maud,” said she, severely. “You didn’t think that tea at the Tower heavy last week, nor the ghosts in the mess-room of the Blues. Lady Goldthred’s an old friend of mine, and it was very kind of her to ask us. Besides, Dick’s coming down in the barouche.”

Maud’s face brightened, and, be sure, Dick saw it brighten.

“That accounts for it,” said she, with the rare smile in her eyes; “and he thinks we shan’t let him smoke, so he sulks beforehand, grim, grave, and silent as a ghost. Mr. Stanmore, cheer up. You may smoke the whole way down. *I’ll* give you leave.”

"Nonsense, my dear," observed Aunt Agatha, sternly. "He don't want to do anything of the kind. What have you been about, Maud, all the morning? I looked for you everywhere to help me with the visiting-list."

"Puckers and I took a 'constitutional,'" answered Miss Bruce, unblushingly. "We wanted to do some shopping." But her dark eyes stole towards Dick, and, although his never met them, she felt satisfied he had witnessed her interview with Tom Ryfe in the Square gardens.

"I saw you both coming in, Miss Bruce," said Dick, breaking the awkward pause which succeeded Maud's misstatement. "I think Puckers wears twice as smart a bonnet as yours. I hope you are not offended."

Again that smile from the dark eyes. Dick felt, and perhaps she meant him to feel, that he had lost nothing in her good opinion by ignoring even to herself that which she wished to keep unknown.

“I think you’ve very little taste in bonnets, whatever you may have in faces,” answered the young lady; “and I think I shall go and put one on now that will make you eat your words humbly when I appear in it on the lawn at Lady Goldthred’s.”

“I have no doubt there won’t be a dry eye in the place,” answered Dick, looking after her, as she left the room, with undisguised admiration in his honest face—with something warmer and sweeter than admiration creeping and gathering about his heart.

So they all went down together in the barouche, Dick sitting with his back to the horses, and gazing his fill on the young beauty opposite, looking so cool and fair in her fresh summer draperies, so thoroughly in keeping with the light and sparkle of everything around—the brilliant sunshine, the spring foliage, the varying scenery, even to the varnish and glitter of the well-appointed carriage, and the plated harness on the horses.

Aunt Agatha conversed but sparingly. She

was occupied with the phantom pages of her banker's book ; with the shortcomings of a new housemaid ; not a little with the vague sketch of a dress, to be worn at certain approaching gaieties, which should embody the majesty of the chaperon without entirely resigning all pretensions to youth. But for one remark, "that the coachman was driving very badly," I think she travelled in stately silence as far as Kew. Not so the other occupants of the barouche. Maud, desirous of forgetting much that was distasteful to her in the events of the morning, and, indeed, in the course of her daily life, resolved to accept the tangible advantages of the present, nor scrupled to show that she enjoyed fresh air, fine weather, and pleasant company. Dick, stimulated by her presence, and never disinclined to gaiety of spirit, exerted himself to be agreeable, pouring forth a continuous stream of that pleasant nonsense which is the only style of conversation endurable in the process of riding, driving, or other jerking means of locomotion.

It is only when his suit has prospered that a man feels utterly idiotic and moonstruck in the presence of the woman he adores. Why, when life is scarce endurable but at her side, he should become a bore in her presence, is only another intricacy in the many puzzles that constitute the labyrinth of love. So long as he flutters unsinged about its flame, the moth is all the happier for the warmth of the candle, all the livelier for the inspiration of its rays. Dick Stanmore, turning into the Kensington road, was the insect basking in those bright, alluring beams; but Dick Stanmore on the further side of Kew felt more like the same insect when its wings have been already shrivelled and its powers of flight destroyed in the temerity of its adoration.

Still it was pleasant, very pleasant. She looked so beautiful, she smiled so kindly, always with her eyes, sometimes with the perfect, high-bred mouth; she entered so gaily into his gossip, his fancies, his jokes, allowing him to hold her parasol and arrange her shawls with

such sweetness and good-humour, that Dick felt quite sorry to reach the Portugal laurels and trim lawns of their destination, when the drive was over from which he had derived this new and unforeseen gratification. Something warned him that, in accordance with that rule of compensation which governs all terrestrial matters, these delights were too keen to last, and there must surely be annoyance and vexation in store to complete the afternoon.

His first twinge originated in the marked admiration called forth by Miss Bruce's appearance at the very outset. She had scarcely made her salaam to Lady Goldthred, and passed on through billiard-room, library, and verandah, to the two dwarfed larches and half-acre of mown grass which constitute the wilderness of a suburban villa, ere Dick felt conscious that his could be no monopoly of adoration. Free trade was at once declared by glances, whispers and inquiries from a succession of well-dressed young gentlemen, wise doubtless in their own conceit, yet not wanting in

that worldly temerity which impels fools to rush in where angels fear to tread, and gives the former class of beings, in their dealings with that sex which is compounded of both, an immeasurable advantage over the latter.

Miss Bruce had not traversed the archery-ground twenty-five feet, from target to target, on her way to the refreshment tent, ere half a dozen of the household troops, a bachelor baronet, and the richest young commoner of his year were presented by her host, at their own earnest request. Dick's high spirits went down like the froth in a glass of soda-water, and he fell back discouraged, to exchange civilities with Lady Goldthred.

That excellent woman, dressed, painted, and wound-up for the occasion, was volubly delighted with everybody; and being by no means sure of Dick's identity, dashed the more cordiality into her manner, while careful not to commit herself by venturing on his name.

"So good of you to come," she fired it at

him as she had fired it at fifty others, "all this distance from town, and such a hot day, to see my poor little place. But isn't it pretty now? And are we not lucky in the weather? And weren't you smothered in dust coming down? And you've brought *the* beauty with you too. I declare Sir Moses is positively smitten. I'm getting quite jealous. Just look at him now. But he's not the only one, that's a comfort."

Dick *did* look, wondering vaguely why the sunshine should have faded all at once. Sir Moses, a little bald personage, in a good-humoured fuss, whom no amount of inexperience could have taken for anything but the "man of the house," was paying the utmost attention to Miss Bruce, bringing her tea, placing a camp-stool for her that she might see the archery, and rendering her generally those hospitable services which it had been his lot to waste on many less attractive objects during that long sunny afternoon.

"Sir Moses is always so kind," answered

Dick, vaguely, "and nobody's breakfasts are so pleasant as yours, Lady Goldthred."

"I'm *too* glad you think so," answered his hostess, who, like a good-hearted woman as she was, took enormous pains with these festivities, congratulating herself, when she washed off her rouge, and doffed her robes of ceremony at night, that she had got through the great penance of her year. "You're always so good-natured. But I *do* think men like to come here. The country air, you know, and the scenery, and plenty of pretty people. Now, there's Lord Bearwarden—look, he's talking to Miss Bruce, under the cedar—he's actually driven over from Windsor, and though he's a way of being so fine and *blasé* and all that, he don't look much bored at this moment, does he? Twenty thousand a year they say, and been everywhere and done everything. Now, I fancy, he wants to marry, for he's much older, you know, than he looks. To hear him talk, you'd think he was a hundred, and broken-hearted into the bargain. For my

part, I've no patience with a melancholy man ; but then I'm not a young lady. You know him, though, of course."

Dick's reply, if he made one, was drowned in a burst of brass music that deafened people at intervals throughout the afternoon, and Lady Goldthred's attention wandered to fresh arrivals, for whom, with fresh smiles and untiring energy, she elaborated many more remarks of a similar tendency.

Dick Stanmore *did* know Lord Bearwarden, as every man about London knows every other man leading the same profitable life. There were many whom he would have preferred as rivals ; but thinking he detected signs of weariness on Maud's face (it had already come to this, that he studied her countenance, and winced to see it smile on any one else), he crossed the lawn, that he might fill the place by her side to which he considered himself as well entitled as another.

His progress took some little time, what with bowing to one lady, treading on the dress

of another, and parrying the attack of a third who wanted him to give her daughter a cup of tea, so that by the time Dick reached her Lord Bearwarden had left Miss Bruce to the attentions of another guest, more smart than gentlemanlike, in whose appearance there was something indefinably out of keeping with the rest. Dick started. It was the man with whom he had seen Maud walking before luncheon in the Square.

People were pairing for a dance on the lawn, and Mr. Stanmore, wedged in by blocks of beauty and mountains of muslin, could neither advance nor retreat. It was no fault of his that he overheard Miss Bruce's conversation with the stranger.

"*Will* you dance with me?" said the latter, in a whisper of suppressed anger, rather than the tone of loving entreaty with which it is customary to urge this pleasant request.

"Impossible!" answered Maud, energetically. "I'm engaged to Lord Bearwarden—it's the Lancers, and he's only gone to make up the set."

The man ground his teeth and knit his brows.

“You seem to forget,” he muttered—“you carry it off with too high a hand. I have a right to bid you dance with me. I have a right, if I chose, to order you down to the river there and row you back to Putney with the tide; and I *will*, I swear, if you provoke me too far.”

She seemed to keep her temper with an effort.

“*Do* be patient,” she whispered, glancing round at the bystanders. “Surely you can trust me. Hush! here comes Lord Bearwarden.”

And taking that nobleman’s arm, she walked off with a mournful, pleading look at her late companion, which poor Dick Stanmore would have given worlds to have seen directed to himself.

There was no more pleasure for him now during the rest of the entertainment. He did indeed obtain a momentary distraction from his

resolution to ascertain the name of the person who had so spoilt his afternoon. It helped him very little to be told the gentleman was "a Mr. Ryfe." Nobody seemed to know any more, and even this information he extracted with difficulty from Lady Goldthred, who added, in a tone of astonishment—

"Why, you brought him, didn't you?"

Dick was mystified—worse, he was unhappy. For a few minutes he wandered about behind the dancers, watching Maud and her partner as they threaded the intricacies of those exceedingly puzzling evolutions which constitute the Lancer quadrilles. Lord Bearwarden was obviously delighted with Maud, and that young lady seemed by no means unconscious or careless of her partner's approval. I do not myself consider the measure they were engaged in threading as particularly conducive to the interchange of sentiment. If my memory serves me right, this complicated dance demands as close an attention as whist, and affords almost as few opportunities of communicating

with a partner. Nevertheless, there is a language of the eyes, as of the lips, and it was not Lord Bearwarden's fault if his looks were misunderstood by their object. All this Dick saw, and seeing, grew more and more disgusted with life in general, with Lady Goldthred's breakfast in particular. When the dance ended, and Dick Stanmore—hovering about his flame, like the poor moth to which I have compared him, once singed and eager to be singed again—was hesitating as to whether he, too, should not go boldly in and try his chance, behold Mr. Ryfe with an offensive air of appropriation walks off with Miss Bruce arm-in-arm, towards the sequestered path that leads to the garden-gate, that leads to the shady lane, that leads to the shining river!

It was all labour and sorrow now. People who called this sort of thing amusement, thought Dick, would go to purgatory for pastime, and a stage farther for diversion. When he broke poor Redwing's back three fields from home in the Melton steeple-chase

he was grieved, annoyed, distressed. When he lost that eleven-pounder in the shallows below Melrose, because "Aundry," his Scottish henchman, was too drunk to keep his legs in a running stream, he was angry, vexed, disgusted; but never before, in his whole life of amusement and adventure, had he experienced anything like the combination of uncomfortable feelings that oppressed him now. He was ashamed of his own weakness, too, all the time, which only made matters worse.

"Hang it!" thought Dick, "I don't see why I should punish myself by staying here any longer. I'll tell my mother I must be back in London to dinner, make my bow, jump into a boat, and scull down to Chelsea. So I will. The scull will do me good, and if—if she *has* gone on the water with that snob, why I shall know the worst. What a strange, odd girl she is! And oh! how I wish she wasn't!"

But it takes time to find a lady, even of Mrs. Stanmore's presence, amongst five hundred of her kind jostled up in half an acre of ground;

neither will the present code of good manners, liberal as it is, bear a guest out in walking up to his hostess *à bout portant*, to interrupt her in an interesting conversation, by bidding her a solemn good-bye hours before anybody else has begun to move. Twenty minutes at least must have elapsed ere Dick found himself in a dainty outrigger with a long pair of sculls, fairly launched on the bosom of the Thames—more than time for the corsair, if corsair he should be, to have sailed far out of sight with false, consenting Maud in the direction of London Bridge.

Dick was no mean waterman. The exercise of a favourite art, combining skill with muscular effort, is conducive to peace of mind. A swim, a row, a gallop over a country, a fencing bout or a rattling set-to with “the gloves” bring a man to his senses more effectually than whole hours of quiescent reflection. Ere the perspiration stood on Dick Stanmore’s brow, he suspected he had been hasty and unjust; by the time he caught his second wind, and had

got fairly into swing, he was in charity with all the world, reflecting, not without toleration and self-excuse, that he had been an ass.

So he sculled on, like a jolly young waterman, making capital way with the tide, and calculating that if the fugitive pair should have done anything so improbable as to take the water in company, he must have overhauled, or at least sighted them ere now.

His spirits rose. He wondered why he should have been so desponding an hour ago. He had made excuses for himself—he began to make them for Maud, nay, he was fast returning to his allegiance, the allegiance of a day, thrown off in five minutes, when he sustained another damper, such as the total reversal of his outrigger and his own immersion, head uppermost, in the Thames, could not have surpassed.

At a bend of the river near Putney he came suddenly on one of those lovely little retreats which fringe its banks—a red-brick house, a pretty flower-garden, a trim lawn, shaded by

weeping-willows, kissing the water's edge. On that lawn, under those weeping-willows, he descried the graceful, pliant figure, the raven hair, the imperious gestures that had made such havoc with his heart, and muttering the dear name, never before coupled with a curse, he knew for the first time, by the pain, how fondly he already loved this wild, heedless, heartless girl, who had come to live in his mother's house. Swinging steadily along in mid-stream, he must have been too far off, he thought, for her to recognise his features; yet why should she have taken refuge in the house with such haste, at an open window, through which a pair of legs clad in trousers denoted the presence of some male companion? For a moment he turned sick and faint, as he resigned himself to the torturing truth. This Mr. Ryfe, then, had been as good as his word, and she, his own proud, refined, beautiful idol, had committed the enormity of accompanying that imperious admirer down here. What could be the secret of such a man's influence over such

a girl? Whatever it was, she must be Dick's idol no longer. And he would have loved her so dearly!—so dearly!

There were tears in the eyes of this jolly young waterman as he pulled on. These things hurt, you see, while the heart is fresh and honest, and has been hitherto untouched. Those should expect rubbers who play at bowls; if people pull their own chestnuts out of the fire they must compound for burnt fingers; and when you wager a living, loving, trustful heart against an organ of wax, gutta-percha, or Aberdeen granite, don't be surprised if you get the worst of the game all through.

He had quite given her up by the time he arrived at Chelsea, and had settled in his own mind that henceforward there must be no more sentiment, no more sunshine, no more romance. He had dreamt his dream. Well for him it was so soon over. *Semel insani-vimus omnes.* Fellows had all been fools once, but no woman should ever make a fool of him

again! No woman ever *could*. He should never see another like *her*!

Perhaps this was the reason he walked half a mile out of his homeward way, through Belgrave Square, to haunt the street in which she lived, looking wistfully into those gardens whence he had seen her emerge that very day with her mysterious companion—gazing with plaintive interest on the bell-handle, and door-scraper of his mother's house—vaguely pondering how he could ever bear to enter that house again—and going through the whole series of those imaginary throes, which are indeed real sufferings with people who have been foolish enough to exchange the dignity and reality of existence for a dream.

What he expected I am at a loss to explain; but although, while pacing up and down the street, he vowed every turn should be the last, he had completed his nineteenth, and was on the eve of commencing his twentieth, when Mrs. Stanmore's carriage rolled up to the door, stopping with a jerk, to discharge itself of that

lady and Maud, looking cool, fresh, and unrumped as when they started. The revulsion of feeling was almost too much for Dick. By instinct, rather than with intention, he came forward to help them out, so confused in his ideas that he failed to remark how entirely his rapid retreat from the breakfast had been overlooked. Mrs. Stanmore seemed never to have missed him. Maud greeted him with a merry laugh, denoting more of good-humour and satisfaction than should have been compatible with keen interest in his movements or justifiable pique at his desertion.

“Why here you are!” she exclaimed gaily. “Actually home before us, like a dog that one takes out walking to try and lose. Poor thing! did it run all the way under the carriage with its tongue out? and wasn’t it choked with dust. and isn’t it tired and thirsty? and won’t it come in and have some tea?”

What could Dick say or do? He followed her upstairs to the back drawing-room, meek and submissive as the dog to which she had

likened him, waiting for her there with a dry mouth and a beating heart while she went to "take off her things;" and when she reappeared smiling and beautiful, able only to propound the following ridiculous question with a gasp—

"Didn't you go on the water then after all?"

"On the water!" she repeated. "Not I. Nothing half so pleasant, I assure you. I wish we had! for anything so slow as the whole performance on dry land, I never yet experienced. I danced five dances, none of them nice ones—I hate dancing on turf—and I had a warm-water ice and some jelly that tasted of bees'-wax. What became of you? We couldn't find you anywhere to get the carriage. However, I asked Aunt Agatha to come away directly somebody made a move, because I was cross and tired and bored with the whole business. I think she liked it much better than I did; but here she is to answer for herself."

Dick had no dinner that day, yet what a pleasant cigar it was he smoked as he coasted

Belgrave Square once more in the sweet spring evening under the gas-lamps! He had been very unhappy in the afternoon, but that was all over now. Anxiety, suspicion, jealousy, and the worst ingredient of the latter, a sense of humiliation, had made wild work with his spirits, his temper, and indeed his appetite; yet twenty minutes in a dusky back drawing-room, a cup of weak tea and a slice of inferior bread and butter, were enough to restore self-respect, peace of mind, and vigour of digestion. He could not recal one word that bore an unusually favourable meaning, one look that might not have been directed to a brother or an intimate friend, and still he felt buoyed up with hope, restored to happiness. The reaction had come on, and he was more in love with her than ever.



CHAPTER VIII.

NINA.

IT might have spared Mr. Stanmore a deal of unnecessary discomfort had the owner of those legs which he saw through the open window at Putney thought fit to show the rest of his person to voyagers on the river. Dick would then have recognized an old college friend, would have landed to greet him with the old college heartiness, and in the natural course of events would have satisfied himself that his suspicions of Maud were unfounded and absurd.

Simon Perkins is not a romantic name, nor did the exterior of Simon Perkins, as seen

either within or without the Putney cottage, correspond with that which fiction assigns to a hero of romance. His frame was small and slight, his complexion pale, his hair weak and thin, his manner diffident, awkward, almost ungainly, but that its thorough courtesy and good-nature were so obvious and unaffected. In general society people passed him over as a shy, harmless, unmeaning little man ; but those who really knew him affirmed that his courage was not to be damped, nor his nerve shaken, by extremity of danger—that he was always ready with succour for the needy, with sympathy for the sorrowful. In short, as they tersely put it, that “his heart was in the right place.”

For half a dozen terms at Oxford he and Dick had been inseparable. Their intimacy, none the less close for dissimilarity of tastes and pursuits, since Perkins was a reading man and Dick a “fast” one, had been still more firmly soldered by a long vacation spent together in Norway, and a “thrilling tableau,”

as Dick called it, to which their expedition gave rise. Had Simon Perkins's heart been no stouter than his slender person, his companion must have died a damp death, and this story would never have been told.

The young men were in one of the most picturesque parts of that wild and beautiful country, created, as it would seem, for the express gratification of the fisherman and the landscape painter; Simon Perkins, an artist in his very soul, wholly engrossed by the sketch of a mountain, Dick Stanmore equally absorbed in fishing a pool. Scarce twenty yards apart, neither was conscious, for the moment, of the other's existence; Simon, indeed, being in spirit some seven thousand feet above the level of the sea, putting more ochre into the virgin snow that crested his topmost peak, and Dick deftly dropping a fly, the size of a pen-wiper, over the nose of a fifteen pounder that had already once risen to the gaudy lure.

Poising himself, like a Mercury, on a rock in mid stream, the angler had just thrown

eighteen yards of line lightly as a silken thread to an inch, when his foot slipped, and a loud splash, bringing the painter, like Icarus, out of the clouds with a run, startled his attention to the place where his companion was not. In another second Simon had his grip on Dick's collar, and both men were struggling for dear life in the pool. Stanmore could swim, of course, but it takes a good swimmer to hold his own in fisherman's boots, encumbered, moreover, with sundry paraphernalia of his art. Simon was a very mild performer in the water, but he had coolness, presence of mind, and inflexible tenacity of purpose. To these qualities the friends owed it that they ever reached the shore alive. It was a very near thing, and when they found their legs and looked into each other's faces, gasping, dripping, spouting water from ears, nose, and mouth, Dick gathered breath to exclaim, "You trump! I should have been drowned, to a moral!" Whereat the other, choking, coughing, and sputtering, answered faintly, "You old

muff! I believe we were never out of our depth the whole time!"

Perkins did not go up for his degree, and the men lost sight of one another in a few years, cherishing, indeed, a kindly remembrance each of his friend, yet taking little pains to refresh that remembrance by renewed intercourse. How many intimacies, how many attachments outlast a twelvemonth's break? There are certain things people go on caring for, but I fear they are more intimately connected with self in daily life than either the romance of friendship or the intermittent fever of love. The enjoyment of luxury, the pursuit of money-making, seem to lose none of their zest with advancing years, and perhaps to these we may add the taste for art.

Now to Simon Perkins art was as the very air he breathed. The greatest painter was, in his eyes, the greatest man that lived. When he left Oxford, he devoted himself to the profession of painting with such success as rendered him independent, besides enabling him

to contribute largely to the comfort of two maiden aunts with whom he lived.

Not without hard work ; far from it. There is no pursuit, perhaps, which demands such constant and unremitting exertion from its votaries. The ideal to which he strains can never be reached, for his very successes keep building it yet higher, and a painter is so far like a baby his whole life through that he is always learning to *see*.

Simon was still learning to see on the afternoon Dick Stanmore sculled by his cottage windows—studying the effect of a declining sun on the opposite elms, not entirely averting his looks from that graceful girl, who ran into the house to the oarsman's discomfiture, and missing her more than might have been expected when she vanished upstairs. Was not the sun still shining bright on that graceful feathery foliage? He did not quite think it was.

Presently there came to the door a rustle of draperies, and an elderly lady, not remarkable

for beauty, entered the room. Taking no notice of Simon, she proceeded to arrange small articles of furniture with a restless manner that denoted anxiety of mind. At last, stopping short in the act of dusting a china tea-cup, with a very clean cambric handkerchief, she observed, in a faltering voice, "Simon, dear, I feel so nervous I know I shall never get through with it. Where's your aunt Jemima?"

Even while she spoke there appeared at the door another lady, somewhat more elderly, and even less remarkable for beauty, who seated herself bolt upright in an elbow-chair without delay, and, looking austere round, observed, in an impressive voice, "Susannah, fetch me my spectacles; Simon, shut the door."

Of all governments there must be a head. It was obvious that in this deliberative assembly Miss Jemima Perkins assumed the lead. Both commands being promptly obeyed, she pulled her spectacles from their case and put them on, as symbols of authority, forthwith.

“I want your advice, Simon,” said this strong-minded old lady, in a hard, clear voice. “I dare say I shan’t act upon it, but I want it all the same. I’ve no secrets from either of you; but as the head of the family I don’t mean to shirk responsibility, and my opinion is, she must go. Susannah, no weakness. My dear, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. Nina, run upstairs again, we don’t want you just now.”

This to a pretty head with raven hair, that popped saucily in, and as saucily withdrew.

Simon looked wistfully after the pretty head, and relapsed into a day-dream. Was he thinking what a picture it would make, or what a reality it was? His aunt’s voice recalled him to facts.

“Simon,” she repeated, “my opinion is she must go.”

“Go!” said her nephew, vacantly, “what do you mean, aunt? Go?—where?—who?”

“Why that girl we’re all so fond of,” replied Miss Jemima, growing every moment more

severe. "Mr. Algernon used to come here twice every quarter, usedn't he? Never missed the day, did he? and paid his money as regular as clock-work. Susannah, how long is it since he's been to see us?"

Susannah sobbed.

"That's no answer," pursued the inflexible speaker. "To-morrow week it will be ten months since we have seen him; and to-morrow week it will be ten months since we've had a scrap of his handwriting. Is that girl to remain here, dependent on the bounty of a struggling artist and two old maids? My opinion is that she ought to go out and gain her own livelihood; my feeling is that—that—I couldn't bear to think of the poor dear in any home but this!"

Here the old lady, whose assumption of extreme fortitude had been gradually leading to the inevitable catastrophe, broke down altogether, while Susannah, giving rein to her emotions, lifted up her voice and wept.

"You knew who she was all along, Jemima,"

said the latter, gulping sadly at her syllables :
“you know you did ; and it’s cruel to harrow
up our feelings like this.”

Simon said nothing, but on his homely features gathered an expression of resolve, through which there gleamed the bright radiance of hope.

Miss Perkins wiped her eyes and then her spectacles. Resuming her dignity, she proceeded in a calmer voice—

“I will not conceal from you, Susannah, nor from you, Simon, that I have had my suspicions for several years. Those suspicions became a certainty some time ago. There can be no doubt now of the relationship existing between our Nina and the Mr. Algernon, as he called himself, who took such an interest in the child’s welfare. When I saw Mr. Bruce’s death in the paper, I knew that our pet had lost her father. What was I to do ? When I consented to take charge of the child twenty years ago—and a sweet pretty babe she was—I perfectly understood there must be a mystery

connected with her birth. As head of the family, I imparted my suspicions to neither of you, and I kept my conjectures and my disapproval to myself. This seemed only fair to my correspondent, only fair to the child. When I learned Mr. Bruce's death, it came upon me like a shot, that he was the Mr. Algernon who used to visit here, and who furnished such liberal means for the support and education of that girl upstairs.—Susannah, I cannot make myself understood if you will persist in blowing your nose!—Since Mr. Bruce's death no Mr. Algernon has darkened our doors, no remittances have come to hand with the usual signature. Simon, my impression is that no provision whatever has been made for the poor thing, and that our Nina is—is utterly destitute and friendless.”

Here Miss Susannah gave a little scream, whereat her sister glared austere, and resumed the spectacles she had taken off to dry.

“Not friendless, aunt,” exclaimed Simon, in a great heat and fuss; “never friendless so

long as we are all above ground. I am perfectly willing to—stay, Aunt Jemima, I beg your pardon, what do you think ought to be done?”

The old lady smoothed her dress, looking round with placid dignity.

“I will first hear what you two have to propose. Susannah, leave off crying this minute, and tell us what you think of this—this *very* embarrassing position.”

It is possible that but for the formidable adjective Susannah might have originated, and indeed expressed some idea of her own; but to confront a position described by her sister as “embarrassing” was quite beyond her powers, and she could only repeat feebly, “I’ll give her half my money—I’ll give her half my money. We can’t drive her out into the cold.” This with sobs and tears, and a hand pressed helplessly to her side.

Miss Jemima turned from her with contempt, declaring, in an audible whisper, she had “more than half a mind to send the

foolish thing to bed ;” then looked severely at her nephew.

“This girl,” said he, “has become a member of our family, just as if she were a born relation. It seems to me there is no question of feeling or sentiment or prejudice in the matter. It is a mere affair of duty. We are bound to treat Nina Algernon exactly as if she were a Perkins.”

His aunt took his face in both her hands, squeezed it hard, and flattened his nose with a grim kiss. After this feat she looked more severe than ever.

“I believe you are right,” she said ; “I believe this arrangement is a special duty sent on purpose for us to fulfil. I had made up my mind on the subject before I spoke to you, but it is satisfactory to know that you both think as I do. When we give way to our feelings, Susanna, we are sure to be injudicious, sometimes even unjust. But duty is a never-failing guide, and—oh ! my dears, to part with that darling would be to take the very heart

out of my breast ; and, Simon, I'm so glad you agree with me ; and Susannah, dear, if I spoke harshly just now, it was for your own good ; and—and—I'll just step up-stairs into the store-room, and look out some of the house-linen that wants mending. I had rather you didn't disturb me. I shall be down again to tea."

So the old lady marched out firmly enough, but sister and nephew both knew right well that kindly tears, long kept back from a sense of dignity, would drop on the half-worn house-linen, and that in the solitude of her store-room she would give vent to those womanly feelings she deemed it incumbent on her, as head of the family, to restrain before the rest.

Miss Susannah entertained no such scruples. Inflicting on her nephew a very tearful embrace, she sobbed out incoherent congratulations on the decision at which her elder sister had arrived.

"But we mustn't let the dear girl find it out," said this sensitive, weak-minded, but generous-hearted lady. "We should make no sort of difference in our treatment of her, of

course, but we must take great care not to let anything betray us in our manner. I am not good at concealment, I know, but I will undertake that she never suspects anything from mine."

The fallacy of this assertion was so transparent that Simon could not forbear a smile.

"Better make a clean breast of it at once," said he. "Directly there's a mystery in a family, Aunt Susannah, you may be sure there can be no union. It need not be put in a way to hurt her feelings. On the contrary, Aunt Jemima might impress on her that we count on her assistance to keep the pot boiling. Why, she's saving us pounds and pounds at this moment. Where should I get such a model for my Fairy Queen, I should like to know? It ought to be a great picture—a great picture, Aunt Susannah, if I can only work it out. And where should I be if she left me in the lurch? No—no; we won't forget the bundle of sticks. I'll to the maul-stick, and you and Aunt Jemima shall be as cross as two sticks; and as for Nina,

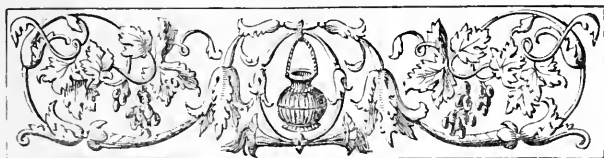
with her bright eyes, and her pleasant voice, and her merry ways, I don't know what sort of a stick we should make of her."

"A fiddlestick, I should think," said that young lady, entering the room from the garden window, having heard, it is to be hoped, no more than Simon's closing sentence. "What are you two doing here in the dark? It's past eight—tea's ready—Aunt Jemima's down—and everything's getting cold."

Candles were lit in the next room, and the tea-things laid. Following the ladies, and watching with a painter's eye the lights and shades as they fell on Nina's graceful beauty, Simon Perkins felt, not for the first time, that if she were to leave the cottage, she would carry away with her all that made it a dear and happy home, depriving him at once of past, present, and future, taking from him the very cunning of his handicraft, and, worse still, the inspiration of his art.

It was no wonder she had wound herself round the hearts of that quiet little family in

the retired Putney villa. As like Maud Bruce in form and feature, as though she had been her twin sister, Nina Algernon possessed the same pale, delicate features, the same graceful form, the same dark, pleading eyes and glossy raven hair ; but Mr. Bruce's elder and unacknowledged daughter had this advantage over the younger, that about her there was a sweetness, a freshness, a quiet gaiety, and a *bonhommie* such as spring only from kindliness of disposition and pure unselfishness of heart. Had she been an ugly girl, though she might have lacked admirers, she could not have long remained without a lover. Being as handsome as Maud, she seemed calculated to rivet more attachments, while she made almost as many conquests. Between the sisters there was a similitude and a difference. One was a costly artificial flower, the other a real garden rose.



CHAPTER IX.

THE USUAL DIFFICULTY.

MAUD'S instincts, when, soon after her father's death, she felt a strong disinclination to live with Aunt Agatha, had not played her false. As inmates of the same house, the two ladies hit it off badly enough. Perhaps because in a certain imperiousness and hardness of character they were somewhat alike, their differences, though only on rare occasions culminating in a battle royal, smouldered perpetually, breaking out, more often than was seemly, in brisk skirmish and rapid passage of arms.

Miss Bruce's education during the lifetime

of her parents had been little calculated to fit her for the position of a dependant, and with all her misgivings, which, indeed, vexed her sadly, she could not yet quite divest herself of an idea that her inheritance had not wholly passed away. Under any circumstances she resolved before long to go at the head of an establishment of her own, so that she should assume her proper position, which she often told herself, with *her* attractions and *her* opportunities was a mere question of will.

Then, like a band of iron tightening round her heart, would come the thought of her promise to Tom Ryfe, the bitter regret for her own weakness, her own overstrained notions of honour, as she now considered them, in committing that promise to writing. She felt as people feel in a dream, when, step which way they will, an insurmountable obstacle seems to arise, arresting their progress, and hemming them in by turns on every side.

It was not in the best of humours that, a few days after Lady Goldthred's party, Maud

descended to the luncheon-table fresh from an hour's consideration of her grievances, and of the false position in which she was placed. Mrs. Stanmore, too, had just sent back a misfitting costume to the dressmaker for the third time; so each lady being, as it were, primed and loaded, the lightest spark would suffice to produce explosion.

While the servants remained it was necessary to keep the peace, but cutlets, mashed potatoes, and a ration of sherry having been distributed, the room was cleared, and a fair field remained for immediate action. Dick's train was late from Newmarket, and he was well out of it.

To do her justice, Maud had meant to intrench herself in sullen silence. She saw the attack coming, and prepared to remain on the defensive. Aunt Agatha began quietly enough—to borrow a metaphor from the noble game of chess, she advanced a pawn.

“I don't know how I'm to take you to Countess Monaco's to-night, Maud; that stupid woman has disappointed me again, and I've

got literally nothing to go in. Besides, there will be such a crush we shall never get away in time for my cousin's ball. I promised her I'd be early if I could."

Now Miss Bruce knew, I suppose because he had told her, that Lord Bearwarden would be at Countess Monaco's reception, but would not be at the said ball. It is possible Mrs. Stanmore may have been aware of this also, and that her pawn simply represented what ladies call "aggravation."

Maud took it at once with her knight. "I don't the least care about Countess Monaco's, aunt," said she. "Dick's not going because he's not asked, and I'm engaged to dance the first dance with him at the other place. It's a family bear-fight, I conclude; but though I hate the kind of thing, Dick is sure to take care of *me*."

Check for Aunt Agatha, whom this off-hand speech displeased for more reasons than one. It galled her to be reminded that her step-son had received no invitation from the smart

foreign countess; while that Maud should thus appropriate him, calling him "Dick" twice in a breath, was more than she could endure. So she moved her king out of position.

"Talking of balls," said she, in a cold, civil voice, "reminds me that you danced three times the night before last with Lord Bearwarden, and twice with Dick, besides going down with him to supper. I don't like finding fault, Maud, but I have a duty to perform, and I speak to you as if you were my own child."

"How can you be sure of that?" retorted incorrigible Maud. "You never had one."

This was a sore point, as Miss Bruce well knew. Aunt Agatha's line of battle was sadly broken through, and her pieces huddled together on the board. She began to lose her head, and her temper with it.

"You speak in a very unbecoming tone, Miss Bruce," said she, angrily. "You force me into saying things I would much rather keep to myself. I don't wish to remind you of your position in this house."

It was now Maud's turn to advance her strongest pieces—castles, rooks, and all.

“You remind me of it often enough,” she replied, with her haughtiest air—an air which, notwithstanding its assumption of superiority, certainly made her look her best; “if not in words, at least in manner, twenty times a day. You think I don't see it, Mrs. Stanmore, or that I don't mind it, because I've too much pride to resent it as it deserves. I am indebted to you, certainly, for a great deal—the roof that shelters me, and the food I eat. I owe you as much as your carriage-horses, and a little less than your servants, for I do my work and get no wages. Never fear but I shall pay up everything some day; perhaps very soon. You had better get your bill made out, so as to send it in on the morning of my departure. I wish the time had come to settle it now.”

Mrs. Stanmore was aghast. Very angry, no doubt, but yet more surprised, and perhaps the least thing cowed. Her cap, her laces, the lockets round her neck, the very hair of her

head, vibrated with excitement. Maud, cool, pale, impassible, was sure to win at last, waiting, like the superior chess player, for that final mistake which gives an adversary check-mate.

It came almost immediately. Mrs. Stanmore set down her sherry, because the hand that held her glass shook so she could not raise it to her lips. "You are rude and impertinent," said she; "and if you really think so wickedly, the sooner you leave this house the better, though you *are* my brother's child; and—and—Maud, I don't mean it. But how can you say such things? I never expected to be spoken to like this."

Then the elder lady began to cry, and the game was over. Before the second course came in a reconciliation took place. Maud presented a pale, cold cheek to be kissed by her aunt, and it was agreed that they should go to Countess Monaco's for the harmless purpose, as they expressed it, of "just walking through the rooms," leaving thereafter as soon as

practicable for the ball; and Mrs. Stanmore, who was good-hearted if bad-tempered, trusted "dear Maud would think no more of what she had said in a moment of irritation, but that they would be better friends than ever after their little tiff."

None the less, though, for this decisive victory did the young lady cherish her determination to settle in life without delay. Lord Bearwarden had paid her considerable attention on the few occasions they had met. True, he was not what the world calls a "marrying man;" but the world, in arranging its romances, usually leaves out that very chapter—the chapter of accidents—on which the whole plot revolves. And why should there not be a Lady Bearwarden of the present as of the past? To land so heavy a fish would be a signal triumph. Well, it was at least possible, if not probable. This should be a matter for future consideration, and must depend greatly on circumstances.

In the mean time, Dick Stanmore would

marry her to-morrow. Of that she felt sure. Why? Oh, because she did! I believe women seldom deceive themselves in such matters. Dick had never told her he cared for her; after all, she had not known him many weeks, yet a certain deference and softness of tone, a diffidence and even awkwardness of manner, increasing painfully when they were alone, betrayed that he was her slave. And she liked Dick, too, very much, as a woman could hardly help liking that frank and kindly spirit. She even thought she could love him if it was necessary, or at any rate make him a good wife, as wives go. He would live in London, of course, give up hunting and all that. It really might do very well. Yes, she would think seriously about Dick Stanmore, and make up her mind without more delay.

But how to get rid of Tom Ryfe? Ignore it as she might—strive as she would to forget it in excitement, dissipation, and schemes for the future, none the less was the chain always

round her neck. Even while it ceased to gall her she was yet sensible of its weight. So long as she owed him money, so long as he held her written promise to repay that debt with her hand, so long was she debarred all chances for the future, so long was she tied down to a fate she could not contemplate without a shudder. To be "a Mrs. Ryfe" when on the cards lay such a prize as the Bearwarden coronet, when she need only put out her hand and take Dick Stanmore, with his brown locks, his broad shoulders, his genial, generous heart, for better or worse ! It was unbearable. And then to think that she could ever have fancied she liked the man ; that, even now, she had to give him clandestine meetings, to see him at unseasonable hours, as if she loved him dearly, and was prepared to make every sacrifice for his sake ! Her pride revolted, her whole spirit rose in arms at the reflection. She knew he cared for her too ; cared for her in his own way very dearly ; and " *C'est ce que c'est d'être femme,*" I fear she hated him all the more !

So long as a woman knows nothing about him, her suspicion that a man likes her is nine points out of ten in his favour; but directly she has fathomed his intellect and probed his heart; squeezed the orange, so to speak, and resolved to throw away the rind, in proportion to the constancy of his attachment will be her weariness of its duration; and from weariness in such matters there is but one short step to hatred and disgust.

Tom Ryfe must be paid his money. To this conclusion, at least, Maud's reflections never failed to lead. Without such initiatory proceeding it was useless to think of demanding the return of that written promise. But how to raise the funds? After much wavering and hesitation, Miss Bruce resolved at last to pawn her diamonds. So dearly do women love their trinkets, that I believe, though he never knew it, Tom Ryfe was more than once within an ace of gaining the prize he longed for, simply from Maud's disinclination to part with her jewels. How little he dreamt that the very

packet which had helped to cement into intimacy his first acquaintance with her should prove the means of dashing his cherished hopes to the ground, and raising yet another obstacle to shut him out from his lovely client!

While Maud is meditating in the back drawing-room, and Aunt Agatha, having removed the traces of emotion from her eyes and nose, is trying on a bonnet up stairs, Dick Stanmore has shaken off the dust of a railway journey, in his lodgings, dressed himself from top to toe, and is driving his phaeton merrily along Piccadilly, on his way to Belgrave Square. How his heart leaps as he turns the well-known corner—how it beats as he skips into his stepmother's house—how it stops when he reaches the door of that back drawing-room, where, knowing the ways of the establishment, he hopes to find his treasure alone! The colour returns to his face. There she is in her usual place, her usual attitude, languid, graceful, indolent, yet glad to see him nevertheless.

"I'm in luck," said Dick, blushing like a schoolboy. "My train was late, and I was so afraid you'd be gone out before I could get here. It seems so long since I've seen you. And where have you been, and how's my mother, and what have you been doing?"

"What have *you* been doing, rather?" repeats the young lady, giving him a cool and beautiful hand that he keeps in his own as long as he dares. "Three days at Newmarket are long enough to make 'a man or a mouse,' as you call it, of a greater capitalist than you, Mr. Stanmore. Seriously, I hope you've had a good week."

"Only lost a pony on the whole meeting," answered Dick, triumphantly. "And even that was a 'fluke,' because Bearwarden's Bacchante filly was left at the post."

"I congratulate you," said Maud, with laughter gleaming in her dark eyes. "I suppose you consider that tantamount to winning. Was Lord Bearwarden much disappointed, and did he swear horribly?"

“Bearwarden never swears,” replied Dick. “He only told the starter he wondered he could get them off at all; for it must have put him out sadly to see all the boys laughing at him. I’ve no doubt one or two were fined in the very next race, for the official didn’t seem to like it.”

Maud pondered. “Is Lord Bearwarden very good-tempered?” said she.

“Well, he never breaks out,” answered Dick. “But why do you want to know?”

“Because you and he are such friends,” said this artful young lady. “Because I can’t make him out—because I don’t care whether he is or not! And now, Mr. Stanmore, though you’ve not been to see your mamma yet, you’ve behaved like a good boy, considering; so I’ve got a little treat in store for you. Will you drive me out in your phaeton?”

“Will a duck swim?” exclaimed Dick, delighted beyond measure, with but the one drawback to supreme happiness, of a wish that his off-horse had been more than twice in harness.

“Now before I go to put my bonnet on,” continued Miss Bruce, threatening him with her finger like a child, “you must promise to do exactly what you’re told—to drive very slow and very carefully, and to set me down the instant I’m tired of you, because Aunt Agatha won’t hear of our going for more than half an hour or so, and it will take some diplomacy to arrange even that.”

Then she tripped upstairs, leaving the door open, so that Dick, looking at himself in the glass, wondering, honest fellow, what she could see in him to like, and thinking what a lucky dog he was, overheard the following conversation at the threshold of his stepmother’s chamber on the floor above.

A light tap—a smothered “Who’s there?” and the silvery tones of the voice he loved—

“Aunt Agatha—may Mr. Stanmore drive me to Rose and Brilliant’s in his phaeton?”

Something that sounded very like “Certainly not.”

“But please, Aunt Agatha,” pleaded the

voice, "I've got a headache, and an open carriage will do me so much good, and you can call for me afterwards, whenever you like, to do our shopping. I shan't be five minutes putting my bonnet on, and the wind's changed, and it's such a beautiful day!"

Here a door opened, whispers were exchanged, it closed with a bang, a bell rang, an organ in the street struck up "The Marseillaise," and ere it had played eight bars, Maud was on the stairs again, looking, to Dick's admiring eyes, like an angel in a bonnet coming straight down from heaven.

In after-days he often thought of that happy drive—of the pale, beautiful face, in its transparent little bonnet, turned confidingly upwards to his own, of the winning ways, the playfully imperious gestures, the sweet caressing voice—of the hope thrilling to his very heart that perhaps for him might be reserved the blissful lot of thus journeying with her by his side through life.

As they passed into the Park at Albert Gate,

two of his young companions nodded and took off their hats, elbowing each other, as who should say, "I suppose that's a case!" How proud Dick felt, and how happy! The quarter of a mile that brought him to Apsley House seemed a direct road to Paradise; the man who is always watering the rhododendrons shone like a glorified being, and the soft west wind fanned his temples like an air from heaven. How pleasant she was, how quaint, how satirical, how amusing! Not the least frightened when that off-horse shied in Piccadilly—not the least impatient (neither, be sure, was he) when a block of carriages kept them stationary for ten minutes in the narrow gorge of Bond Street. Long before they stopped at Rose and Brilliant's it was all over with Dick.

"You're not to get out," said Maud, while they drew up to the door of that fashionable jeweller. "Yes you may, just to keep my dress off the wheel, but you mustn't come in. I said I'd a treat for you; now tell me without prevarication—will you have sleeve-links with

a cipher or a monogram? Speak up—in one word—quick!”

Sleeve-links! and from *her*! A present to be valued and cherished more than life itself. He could hardly believe his senses. Far too bewildered to solve the knotty point of cipher *versus* monogram, he muttered some incoherent syllables, and only began to recover when he had stared blankly for a good five minutes at the off-horse's ears, from the driving-seat of his phaeton.

It took a long time apparently to pick out those sleeve-links. Perhaps the choicest assortment of such articles remained in the back shop, for thither Miss Bruce retired; and it is possible she may have appealed to the proprietor's taste in her selection, since she was closeted with that gentleman in earnest conference for three-quarters of an hour. Dick had almost got tired of waiting, when she emerged at last to thank him for her drive, and to present him, as she affirmed, with the results of her protracted shopping.

“There is a design on them already,” said she, slipping a little box of card into his hand with her pleasantest smile, “so I could not have your initials engraved, but I dare say you won’t lose them all the same.”

Dick rather thought *not*, hiding the welcome keepsake away in his waistcoat pocket, as near his heart as the construction of that garment would permit; but his day’s happiness was over now, for Mrs. Stanmore had arrived in her brougham to take his companion away for the rest of the afternoon.

That night, before he went to bed, I think he was fool enough to kiss the insensible sleeve-links more than once. They were indeed choice little articles of workmanship, bearing on their surface two quaint and fanciful designs, representing a brace of Cupids in difficulty, the one singed by his own torch, the other crying over a broken bow.

At the same hour Maud was enclosing an order for a large sum of money in a letter which seemed to cost her much study and

vexation. Even Miss Bruce found some difficulty in explaining to a lover that she valued truth, honour, and fidelity at so many hundred pounds, while she begged to forward him a cheque for the amount in lieu of the goods marked "damaged and returned."



CHAPTER X.

THE FAIRY QUEEN.

I HAVE said that Simon Perkins was a painter to the tips of his fingers. Just as a carpenter cannot help looking at a piece of wood with a professional glance it is impossible to mistake—a glance that seems to embrace at once its length, depth, thickness, toughness, and general capabilities, so a painter views every object in nature, animate or inanimate, as a subject for imitation and study of his art. The heavens are not too high, the sea too deep, nor the desert too wide to afford him a lesson; and the human countenance, with its endless variety of feature and expression, is a book he

never wearies of learning by heart. When his professional interest in beauty is enhanced by warmer feelings, it may be imagined that vanity could require no fuller tribute of admiration than the worship of one whose special gift it is to decide on the symmetry of outward form.

As a painter, Simon Perkins approved of Nina Algernon—as a man he loved her. Lest his position should not prove sufficiently fatal, she had become of late practically identified with his art, almost as completely as she was mixed up with his every-day life. For many months, perhaps even for years, the germ of a great work had taken root in his imagination. Slowly, almost painfully, that germ developed itself, passing through several stages, sketch upon sketch, till it came to maturity at last in the composition of a large picture on which he was now employed.

The subject afforded ample scope for liberty of fancy in form and grouping—for the indulgence of a gorgeous taste in colouring and

costume. It represented Thomas the Rhymer in Fairyland, at the moment when its glamour is falling from his eyes, when its magic lustre is dying out on all that glittering pageantry and the elfin is fading to a gnome. The handsome wizard turns from a crowd of phantom shapes, half-lovely, half-grotesque—for their change is even now in progress—to look wistfully and appealingly on the queen.

There is a pained expression in his comely features, of hurt affection, and trust betrayed, yet not without a ray of pride and triumph, that, come what might to the others, she is still unchanged. Around him the fairies are shedding their glory as trees in autumn shed their leaves. Here a sweet laughing face surmounts the hideous body of an imp, there the bright scales of an unearthly armour shrivel to rottenness and dust. The dazzling robes are turning blank and colourless, the emerald rays waning to a pale, sad light, the flashing diadem is dulled and dim. Yet on the fairy queen

there lowers no shadow of change, there threaten no symptoms of decay.

Bathed in the halo of a true though hapless love, she is still the same as when he first saw her all those seven long years ago, glistening in immortal charms, and knelt to her for the queen of heaven, where she rode—"under the linden tree."

It is obvious that on her countenance, besides the stamp of exceeding beauty, there must appear sorrow, self-reproach, fortitude, majesty, and undying tenderness. All these the painter thought he read in Nina Algernon's girlish face.

So she sat to him dutifully enough for a model of his fairy queen, and if she wearied at times, as I think she must, comforted herself with the remembrance that in this way she helped the family who gave her bread.

For the convenience of sitters, Simon Perkins had his painting-room in Berners Street: thither it was his custom to resort in the morning, by penny steamer or threepenny

omnibus, and there he spent many happy hours working hard with palette and brush. Not the least golden seemed those in which Nina accompanied him to sit patiently while he studied, and drew her, line by line, feature by feature. The expeditions to and fro were delightful, the labour was pleasure, the day was gone far too soon.

A morning could not but be fine, when, emerging from an omnibus at Albert Gate, Simon walked by the side of his model through Hyde Park on their way to Berners Street; but about this period one morning seemed even finer than common, because that Nina, taking his arm as they crossed Rotten Row, thought fit to confide to him an interview of the day before with Aunt Jemima, in which she extorted from that dear old lady with some difficulty the fact of her own friendless position in the world.

“And I don’t mind it a bit,” continued the girl, catching her voice like a child, as was her habit when excited, “for I’m sure you’re all so

kind to me that I'd much rather not have any other friends. And I don't want to be independent, and I'll never leave you, so long as you'll keep me. And oh! Simon, isn't it good of your aunts, and you too, to have taken care of me ever since I was quite a little thing? For I'm no relation, you know—and how can I ever do enough for you? I can't. It's impossible. And you don't want me to, if I could!"

Notwithstanding the playful manner which was part of Nina's self, there were tears of real feeling in her eyes, and I doubt if Simon's were quite dry while he answered—

"You belong to us just as much as if you *were* a relation, Nina. My aunts have said so ever since I can remember, and as for me, why you used to ride on my foot when you were in short frocks! What a little romp it was! Always troublesome, and always will be—and that's why we're so fond of you." He spoke lightly, but his voice shook nevertheless.

"So you ought to be," she answered. "For you know how much I love you all."

“What, even stern Aunt Jemima?” said this blundering young man, clumsily beating about the bush, and thus scaring the bird quite as much as if he had thrust his hand boldly into the nest.

“Aunt Jemima best of all,” replied Nina, saucily, “because she’s the eldest, and tries to keep me in order, but she can’t.”

“And which of us next best, Nina?” continued he, turning away with extraordinary interest in a mowing machine.

“Aunt Susannah, of course.” This very demurely, while tightening her pretty lips to keep back a laugh.

“Then I come last,” he observed, gently; but there was something in the tone that made her glance sharply in his face.

She pressed his arm. “You dear old simple Simon,” said she, kindly. “Surely you must know me by this time. I love you very dearly, just as if you were my brother. Brother, indeed! I don’t think if I’d a father I could be much fonder of him than I am of you.”

What a bright morning it had been five minutes ago, and now the sky seemed clouded all at once. Simon even thought the statue of Achilles looked more grim and ghostly than usual, lowering there in his naked bronze.

She had wounded him very deeply, that pretty unconscious archer. These random shafts for which no interposing shield makes ready are sure to find the joints in our harness. A tough hard nature such as constitutes the true fighter only presses more doggedly to the front, but gentler spirits are fain to turn aside out of the battle, and go home to die. There came a dimness before Simon's eyes, and a ringing in his ears. He scarcely heard his companion, while she asked—

“Who are those men bowing? Do you know them? They must take me for somebody else.”

“Those men bowing” were two no less important characters than Lord Bearwarden and Tom Ryfe, the latter in the act of selling

the former a horse. Such transactions, for some mysterious reason, always take place in the morning, and whatever arguments may be adduced against a too enthusiastic worship of the noble animal, at least it promotes early rising.

Tom Ryfe was one of those men rarely seen in the saddle or on the box, but who, nevertheless, always seem to have a horse to dispose of, whatever be the kind required. Hack, hunter, pony, phaeton-horse, he was either possessor of the very animal you wanted, or could suit you with it at twenty-four hours' notice; yet if you met him by accident riding in the Park, he was sure to tell you he had been mounted by a friend; if you saw him driving a team—and few could handle four horses in a crowded thoroughfare with more neatness and precision—you might safely wager it was from the box of another man's coach.

He was supposed to be a very fine rider over a country, and there were vague traditions of

his having gone exceedingly well through great runs on special occasions; but these exploits had obviously lost nothing of their interest in the process of narration, and were indeed enhanced by that obscurity which increases the magnitude of most things, in the moral as in the material world.

Mr. Ryfe knew all the sporting men about London, but not their wives. He was at home on the Downs and the Heath, in the pavilion at Lord's, and behind the traps of the Red House. He dined pretty frequently at the barracks of the household troops, welcome to the genial spirits of his entertainers, chiefly for those qualities with which they themselves credited him; and he called Bearwarden "My lord," wherefore that nobleman thought him a snob, and would perhaps have considered him a still greater if he had *not*.

The horse in question showed good points and fine action. Mr. Ryfe walked, trotted, cantered, and finally reined him up at the rails on which Lord Bearwarden was leaning.

“Rather a flat-catcher, Tom,” said that nobleman, between the whiffs of a cigar. “Too much action for a hunter, and too little body. He wouldn’t carry my weight if the ground was deep, though he’s not a bad goer, I’ll admit.”

“Exactly what I said at first, my lord,” answered Tom, slipping the reins through his fingers, and letting the horse reach over the iron bar against his chest, to crop the tufts of grass beneath, an attitude in which his fine shoulders and liberty of frame showed to great advantage. “I never thought he was a fourteen-stone horse, and I never told you so.”

“And I never told *you* I rode fourteen stone, did I?” replied Lord Bearwarden, who was a little touchy on that score. “Thirteen five at the outside, and not so much as that after deer-stalking in Scotland. He’s clean thorough-bred, isn’t he?”

The purchaser was biting, and Tom understood his business as if he had been brought up to it.

“Clean,” he answered, passing his leg over the horse’s neck, and sliding to the ground, thus leaving his saddle empty for the other. “But he’s thrown away on a heavy man. His place is carrying thirteen stone over high Leicestershire. Nothing could touch him there amongst the hills. Jumping’s a vulgar accomplishment. Plenty of them can jump if one dare ride them, but he’s really an extraordinary fencer. Such a mouth, too, and such a *gentleman*! Why he’s the pleasantest hack in London. You like a nice hack, my lord. Get up and feel him. It’s like riding a bird.”

So Lord Bearwarden jumped on, and altered the stirrups, and crammed his hat down, ere he rode the horse to and fro, trying him in all his paces, and probably falling in love with him forthwith, for he returned with a brightened eye and higher colour to Tom Ryfe on the footway.

It was at this juncture both gentlemen started and took their hats off to the lady who

walked some fifty paces off, arm-in-arm with Simon Perkins, the painter.

Their salute was not returned. The lady, indeed, to whom it was addressed seemed to hurry on all the faster with her companion. It was remarkable, and both remarked it, that neither made any observation on this lack of courtesy, but finished their bargain without apparently half so much interest in sale or purchase as they felt five minutes ago.

"You'll dine with us, Tom, on the 11th?" said Bearwarden, when they parted opposite Knightsbridge Barracks, but he was obviously thinking of something else.

"On the 11th," repeated Tom—"delighted, my lord—at eight o'clock, I suppose," and turned his horse's head soberly towards Piccadilly, proceeding at a walk, as one who revolved certain reflections, not of the most agreeable, in his mind. A dinner at the barracks was usually rather an event with Mr. Ryfe, but on the present occasion he forgot all about it before he had gone a hundred yards.

Lord Bearwarden, rejecting the temptation of luncheon in the mess-room, ran upstairs to his own quarters to think—of course he smoked at the same time.

This nobleman was one of the many of his kind who, to their credit be it said, are not spoiled by sailing down the stream with the wind in their favour. He had been “a good fellow” at Eton, he remained “a good fellow” in the regiment. With general society he was not perhaps quite so popular. People said he “required knowing;” and for those who didn’t choose to take the trouble of knowing him he was a little reserved; with men, even a little rough. His manner was of the world, worldly, and gave the idea of complete heartlessness and *savoir faire*; yet under this seemingly impervious covering lurked a womanly romance of temperament, a womanly tenderness of heart, than which nothing would have made him so angry as to be accused of possessing. His habits were manly and simple, his chief ambition was to distinguish himself as a soldier,

and so far as he could find opportunity he had seen service with credit on the staff. A keen sportsman, he could ride and shoot as well as his neighbours, and this is saying no little amongst the young officers of the Household Brigade.

Anything but a "ladies' man," there was yet something about Bearwarden, irrespective of his income and his coronet, that seemed to interest women of all temperaments and characters. They would turn away from far handsomer, better dressed, and more amusing people to attract his notice when he entered a room, and the more enterprising would even make fierce love to him on further acquaintance, particularly after they discovered what up-hill work it was. Do they appreciate a difficulty the greater trouble it requires to surmount, or do they enjoy a scrape the more, that they have to squeeze themselves into it by main force? I wonder if the sea-nymphs love their Tritons because those zoophytes must necessarily be so cold! It is doubtless

against the hard impenetrable rock that the sea-waves dash themselves again and again. Bearwarden responded but faintly to the boldest advances. There must be a reason for it, said the fair assailants. Curiosity grew into interest, and, flavoured with a dash of pique, formed one of those messes with which, in stimulating their vanity, women fancy they satisfy their hunger of the heart.

Bearwarden was a man with a history; of this they were quite sure, and herein they were less mistaken than people generally find themselves who jump to conclusions. Yes, Bearwarden had a history, and a sad one, so far as the principal actor was concerned. Indeed he dared not think much about it even yet, and drove it—for he was no weak, silly sentimentalist—by sheer force of will out of his mind. Indeed, if it had not wholly changed his *real* self, it had encrusted him with that hardness and roughness of exterior which he turned instinctively to the world. The same thing had happened to him that happens to

most of us at one time or another. Just as the hunting man, sooner or later, is pretty sure to be laid up with a broken collar-bone, so in the career of life must be encountered that inevitable disaster which results in a wounded spirit and a sore heart. The collar-bone, we all know, is a six weeks' job, but injuries of a tenderer nature take far longer to heal. Nevertheless, the cure of these, too, is but a question of time, though, to carry on the metaphor, I think in either case the hapless rider loses some of the zest and dash which distinguished his earlier performances, previous to discomfiture. "Only a woman's hair," wrote Dean Swift on a certain packet hidden away in his desk. And thus a very dark page in Lord Bearwarden's history might have been headed "only a woman's falsehood." Not much to make a fuss about, surely; but he was kind, generous, of a peculiarly trustful disposition, and it punished him very sharply, though he tried hard to bear his sorrow like a man. It was the usual business. He had

attached himself to a lady of somewhat lower social standing than his own, of rather questionable antecedents, and whom the world accepted to a certain extent on sufferance, as it were, and under protest, yet welcomed her cordially enough, nevertheless. His relations abused her, his friends warned him against her; of course he loved her very dearly, all the more that he had to sacrifice many interests for her sake, and so resolved to make her his wife.

For reasons of her own she stipulated that he should leave his regiment, and even in this, though he would rather have lost an arm, he yielded to her wish.

The letter to his colonel in which he requested permission to send in his papers actually lay sealed on the table, when he received a note in a well-known hand that taught him the new lesson he had never expected to learn. The writer besought his forgiveness, deploring her own heartlessness the while, and proceeded to inform him that there was a Somebody else in the field to

whom she was solemnly promised (just as she had been to him), and with whom she was about to unite her Lot—capital L. She never could be happy, of course, but it was her destiny: to fight against it was useless, and she trusted Lord B. would forget her, &c. &c. All this in well-chosen language, and written with an exceedingly good pen.

It was lucky his letter to the colonel had not been sent. In such sorrows as these a soldier learns how his regiment is his real home, how his comrades are the stanchest, the least obtrusive, and the sincerest of friends.

Patting his charger's neck at the very next field-day, Bearwarden told himself there was much to live for still; that it would be unsoldierlike, unmanly, childish, to neglect duty, to wince from pleasure, to turn his back on all the world had to offer, only because a woman followed her nature and changed her mind.

So he bore it very well, and those who knew him best wondered he cared so little: and all the while he never heard a strain of music, nor

felt a ray of sunshine, nor looked on beauty of any kind whatever, without that gnawing cruel pain at his heart. Thus the years passed on, and the women of his family declared that Bearwarden was a confirmed old bachelor.

When he met Miss Bruce at Lady Goldthred's, no doubt he admired her beauty and approved of her manner, but it was neither beauty nor manner, nor could he have explained what it was that caused the pulses within him to stir, as they stirred long ago—that brought back a certain flavour of the old draught he had quaffed so eagerly, to find it so bitter at the dregs. Another meeting with Maud, a dance or two, a whisper on a crowded staircase, and Lord Bearwarden told himself that the deep wound had healed at last; that the grass was growing fresh and fair over the grave of a dead love; that for him too, as for others, there might still be an interest in the chances of the great game.

Surely the blind restored to sight is more grateful, more joyous, more triumphant, than

he who, born in darkness, finds himself overwhelmed and dazzled with the glare of his new gift!

Some men are so strangely constituted that they like a woman all the better for "snubbing" them. Lord Bearwarden had never felt so grave an interest in Miss Bruce as when he entered the barracks under the impression she had cut him dead, without the slightest pretext or excuse.

Not so Tom Ryfe. In that gentleman's mind mingled the several disagreeable sensations of surprise, anger, jealousy, and disgust. Of these he chewed the bitter cud while he rode home, wondering with whom Miss Bruce could thus dare to parade herself in public, maddened at the open rebellion inferred by so ignoring his presence and his love, vowing to revenge himself without delay by tightening the curb and making her feel, to her cost, the hold he possessed over her person and her actions. By the time he reached his uncle's house, he had made up his mind to demand an

explanation, to come to a final understanding, to assert his authority, and to avenge his pride. He turned pale to see Maud's monogram on the envelope of a letter that had arrived during his absence ; paler still, when from this letter a thin slip of stamped paper fluttered to the floor—white to the very lips while he read the sharp, decisive, cruel lines that accounted for its presence in the missive, and that bade him relinquish at a word all the hope and happiness of his life. Without unbuttoning his coat, without removing the hat from his head, or the gloves from his hands, he sat fiercely down, and wrote his answer.

“ You think to get rid of me, Miss Bruce, as you would get rid of an unsuitable servant, by giving him his wages and bidding him to go about his business. You imagine that the debt between us is such as a sum of money can at once wipe out : that because you have been able to raise this money (and how you did so I think I have a right to ask) our business connection ceases, and the *lover*, inconvenient,

no doubt, from his priority of claim, must go to the wall directly the *lawyer* has been paid his bill. You never were more mistaken in your life. Have you forgotten a certain promise I hold of yours, written in your own hand, signed with your own signature, furnished, as itself attests, of your own free will? and do you think I am a likely man to forego such an advantage? You might have had me for a friend—how dear a friend I cannot bear to tell you now. If you persist in making me an enemy, you have but yourself to blame. I am not given to threaten; and you know that I can generally fulfil what I promise. I give you fair warning then: so surely as you try, in the faintest item, to elude your bargain, so surely will I cross your path, and spoil your game, and show you up before the world. Mine you are, and mine you shall be. If of free will, happily; if not, then to your misery and my own. But, mark me, always *mine!*”

“The wisest clerks are not the wisest men.”

It is a bad plan ever to drive a woman into a corner ; and with all his knowledge of law, I think Mr. Ryfe could hardly have written a more ill-advised and injudicious letter than the above to Miss Bruce.



CHAPTER XI.

IN THE SCALES.

IT was a declaration of war. Of all women in the world—and this is saying a great deal—Maud was perhaps the least disposed to accept anything like usurpation, or assumption of undue authority, especially on the part of one in whose character she had detected an element of weakness. Tom Ryfe, notwithstanding his capabilities, was a fool, like most others, where his feelings were touched, and proved it by the injudicious means he used to attain the end he so desired.

Locked in her own room, she read his letter over and over again, with a bitter curl of her

lip, that denoted hatred, scorn, even contempt. When a man has been unfortunate enough to excite the last of these amiable feelings, he should lose no time in decamping, for the game is wholly and irretrievably lost. Mr. Ryfe would have felt this, could he have seen the gestures of the woman he loved, while she tore his letter into shreds—could he have marked the carriage of her haughty head, the compression of her sweet, resolute lips, the fierce energy of her white, cruel hands. Maud paced the floor for some half-dozen turns, opened the window, arranged the bottles on her toilet-table, the flowers on her chimneypiece, even took a good long look at herself in the glass, and sat down to think.

For weeks she had been revolving in her mind the necessity of breaking with Tom Ryfe, the policy of securing position and freedom by an early marriage. That odious letter decided her; and now it only remained to make her choice. There are women—and these, though sometimes the most fascinating, by no means

the most trustworthy of their sex—who possess over mankind a mesmeric influence, almost akin to witchcraft. Without themselves feeling deeply, perhaps for the very reason that they do *not*, they are capable of exercising a magic sway over those with whom they come in contact ; and while they attract more admirers than they know what to do with, are seldom very fortunate in their selection, or happy in their eventual lot. Miss Bruce was one of these witches, far more mischievous than the old conventional hags we used to burn under the sapient government of our first Stuart, and she knew a deal better than any old woman who ever mounted a broomstick the credulity of her victims, the dangerous power of her spells. These she had lately been using freely. It was time to turn their exercise to good account.

“ Mr. Stanmore *would*, in a moment,” thought Maud, “ if I only gave him the slightest hint. And I like him. Yes. I like him very much indeed. Poor Dick ! What

a fool one can make a man look, to be sure, when he's in love, as people call it! Aunt Agatha wouldn't much fancy it, I suppose; not that I should care two pins about that. And Dick's very easy to manage—too easy, I think. He seems as if I couldn't make him angry. I made him *sorry*, though, the other day, poor fellow! but that's not half such fun. Now Lord Bearwarden *has* got a temper, I'm sure. I wonder, if we were to quarrel, which would give in first. I don't think I should. I declare it would be rather nice to try. He's good-looking—that's to say, good-looking for a *man*. It's an ugly animal at best. And they tell me the Den is such a pretty place in the autumn! And twenty thousand a year! I don't care so much about the money part of it. Of course one must have money; but Selina St. Croix assured me that they called him The Impenetrable; and there wasn't a girl in London he ever danced with twice. *Wasn't* there? He danced with me three times in two hours; but I didn't say so. I suppose people

would open their eyes. I've a great mind—a *very* great mind. But then, there's Dick. He'd be horribly bored, poor fellow! And the worst of it is, he wouldn't *say* anything; but I know exactly how he'd look, and I should feel I was a *beast*! What a bother it all is! But something must be done. I can't go on with this sort of life; I can't stand Aunt Agatha much longer. There she goes, calling on the stairs again! Why can't she send my maid up, if she wants me?"

But Miss Bruce ran down willingly enough when her aunt informed her, from the first floor, that she must make haste, and Dick was in the large drawing-room.

She found mother and son, as they called themselves, buried in a litter of cards, envelopes, papers of every description referring to "Peerage," "Court Guide," visiting-list—all such aids to memory—the charts, as it were, of that voyage which begins in the middle of April and ends with the last week in July. As usual on great undertakings, from the opening

of a campaign to the issuing of invitations for a ball, too much had been left to the last moment ; there was a great deal to do, and little time to do it.

“ We can’t get on without *you*, Miss Bruce,” said Dick, with rising colour and averted eyes, that denoted how much less efficient an auxiliary he would prove since she had come into the room. “ My mother has mislaid the old visiting-list, and the new one only goes down to T : so that the U’s, and the V’s, and W’s will be all left out. Think how we shall be hated in London next week ! To be sure it’s what my mother calls ‘ small and early,’ like young potatoes, and I hear there are three hundred cards sent out already.”

“ You’ll only hinder us, Mr. Stanmore,” said Maud. “ Hadn’t you better go away again ?” but observing Dick’s face fall, the smiling eyes added, plainly as words could speak, “ if you *can* !” She looked pale though, and unhappy, he thought. Of course he felt fonder of her than ever.

“Hinder you!” he repeated. “Why, I’m the mainstay of the whole performance. Don’t I bring you eight-and-twenty dancing men? all at once if you wish it, in a body, like soldiers.”

“Nonsense, my dear,” interrupted Aunt Agatha. “The staircase will be crowded enough as it is.”

Maud laughed.

“But are they *real* dancing men?” she asked, “not ‘dummies,’ ‘duffers,’—what do you call them? people who only stand against the wall and look idiotic. They’re no use unless they work regularly through; as if it was a match or a boat-race. I don’t call it dancing to hover about, and be always wanting to go down to tea or supper, and to haunt one and look cross if one behaves with common propriety—like some people I know.”

Dick accepted the imputation.

“*I’m* not a dancing man,” said he, “though my eight-and-twenty friends are. I cannot see the pleasure of being hustled about in a hot room with a girl I never saw before in my life,

and never want to see again,—who is looking beyond me all the time, watching the door for another fellow who never comes.”

“Then why on earth do you go?” asked Miss Bruce, simply.

“*You* know why,” he answered in a low voice, without raising his eyes to her face.

“Oh! I dare say,” replied Maud; but though it was couched in a tone of banter, the smile that accompanied this pertinent remark seemed to afford Dick unbounded satisfaction.

Mrs. Stanmore looked up from her writing-table.

“I can’t get on while you two are jabbering in that corner.” (She had not heard a word either of them said.) “I’ll take my visiting-list upstairs. You can put these cards in envelopes and direct them. It will help me a little, but you’re neither of you much use.”

She gathered her materials together and was leaving the room. Dick’s heart began beating to some purpose; but his stepmother stopped at the door and addressed her niece.

"By-the-by, Maud, I'd almost forgotten. I'm going to Rose and Brilliant's. Fetch me your diamonds, and I'll take them to be cleaned. I can see the people myself, you know, and make sure of your having them back in time for the ball."

The girl turned white. Dick saw it, though his mother did not. He observed, too, that she gasped as if she was trying to form words which would not come.

"I am not going to wear them." She got it out at last with difficulty.

"Not wear them! nonsense!" was the reply. "Bring them down, my dear, at any rate, and let me look them over. If you don't want it, you might lend me the collar—it would go very well with my mauve satin."

Maud's eyes turned here and there as if to look for help, and it was Dick's nature to throw himself in the gap.

"I'll take them, mother," said he. "My phaeton's at the door now. You've plenty to do, and it will save you a long drive. Besides,

I can blow the people up more effectually than a lady."

"I'm not so sure of that," answered Mrs. Stanmore. "However, it's a sensible plan enough. Maud can fetch them down for you, and you may come back to dinner if you're disengaged."

So speaking, Mrs. Stanmore sailed off, leaving the young people alone.

Maud thanked him with such a look as would have repaid Dick for a far longer expedition than from Belgravia to Bond Street.

"What should I do without you, Mr. Stanmore?" she said. "You always come to the rescue just when I want you most."

He coloured with delight.

"I like doing things for *you*," said he, simply ; "but I don't know that taking a parcel a mile and a-half is such a favour after all. If you'll bring it, I'll start directly you give the word."

Miss Bruce had been very pale hitherto, now a burning blush swept over her face to the temples.

“I—I can’t bring you my diamonds,” said she, “for the first of those thirty reasons that prevented Napoleon’s general from bringing up his guns—I haven’t got them: they’re at Rose and Brilliant’s already.”

“Maud!” he exclaimed, unconsciously using her Christian name—a liberty with which she seemed in nowise offended.

“You may well say ‘Maud!’” she murmured in a soft, low voice. “If you knew all, you’d never call me Maud. I don’t believe you’d ever speak to me again.”

“Then I’d rather *not* know all,” he replied. “Though it would have to be something very bad indeed if it could make me think ill of *you*! Don’t tell me anything, Miss Bruce, except that you would like your diamonds back again.”

“They *must* be got back!” she exclaimed. “I *must* have them back by fair means or foul. I can’t face Aunt Agatha, now that she knows, and can’t appear at her ball without them. Oh! Mr. Stanmore, what shall I do? Do you

think Rose and Brilliant's would *lend* them to me only for one night?"

Dick began to suspect something, began to surmise that this young lady had been "raising the wind," as he called it, and to wonder for what mysterious purpose she could want so large a sum as had necessitated the sacrifice of her most valuable jewels; but she seemed in such distress that he felt this was no time for explanation.

"Do!" he repeated cheerfully, and walking to the window that he might not seem to notice her trouble. "Why do as I wish you had done all through—leave everything to *me*. I was going to say, 'trust me,' but I don't want to be trusted. I only want to be made use of."

Her better nature was conquering her fast.

"But indeed I *will* trust you," she murmured. "You deserve to be trusted. You are so kind, so good, so true. You will despise me, I know—very likely hate me, and never come to see me again; but I don't care—I can't help it. Sit down, and I will tell you everything."

He did not blush nor stammer now, his voice was very firm, and he stood up like a man.

“Miss Bruce,” said he, “Maud—yes, I’m not afraid to call you Maud—I won’t hear another word. I don’t want to be told anything. Whatever you have done makes no difference to me. Some day, perhaps, you’ll remember how I believed in you. In the mean time tell my mother that the diamonds will be back in time for her ball. How late it is! I must be off like a shot. Those horses will be perfectly wild with waiting. I’m coming to dinner. Good-bye!”

He hurried away without another look, and Maud, burying her head in the sofa-cushions, burst out crying, as she had not cried since she was a child.

“He’s too good for me!—he’s too good for me!” she repeated, between the sobs she tried hard to keep back. “How wicked and vile I should be to throw him over! He’s too good for me!—too good for me by far!”



CHAPTER XII.

“ A CRUEL PARTING.”

THE phaeton-horses went off like wildfire, Dick driving as if he was drunk. Omnibus-cads looked after him with undisguised admiration, and hansom cabmen, catching the enthusiasm of pace, found themselves actually wishing they were gentlemen's servants, to have their beer found, and sit behind such steppers as those !

The white foam stood on flank and shoulder when the pair were pulled up at Rose and Brilliant's door.

Dick bustled in with so agitated an air that an experienced shopman instantly lifted the

glass from a tray containing the usual assortment of wedding-rings.

"I'm come about some diamonds," panted the customer, casting a wistful glance towards these implements of coercion the while. "A set of diamonds—very valuable—left here by a lady—a young lady—I want them back again."

He looked about him helplessly ; nevertheless, the shopman, himself a married man, became at once less commiserating, and more confidential.

"Diamonds !" he repeated. "Let me see—yes, sir—quite so—I think I recollect. Perhaps you'll step in and speak to our principal. Mind your hat, if you please, sir—yes, sir—this way, sir."

So saying, he ushered Mr. Stanmore through glass doors into a neat little room at the back, where sat a bald, smiling personage in sober attire, something between that of a provincial master of hounds and a low-church clergyman, whose cool composure, as it struck Dick at the

time, afforded a ludicrous contrast to his own fuss and agitation.

“*My* name is Rose, sir,” said the placid man. “Pray take a seat.”

Nobody can “take a seat” under feelings of strong excitement. Dick grasped the proffered chair by the back.

“Mr. Rose,” he began, “what I have to say to you goes no farther.”

“Oh dear, no!—certainly not—Mr. Stanmore, I believe? I hope I see you well, sir. This is my *private* room, you understand, sir. Whatever affairs we transact here are *in private*. How can I accommodate you, Mr. Stanmore?” Dick looked so eager, the placid man was persuaded he must want money.

“There’s a young lady,” said Dick, plunging at his subject, “who left her diamonds here last week—quite a young lady—very handsome. Did she give you her name?”

Mr. Rose smiled and shook his head benevolently. “If any jewels of value were left with *us*, you may be sure we satisfied ourselves

of the party's name and address. Perhaps I can help you, Mr. Stanmore. Can you favour me with the date?"

"Yes, I can," answered Dick, "and the name too. It's no use humbugging about it. Miss Bruce was the lady's name. There! Now she wants her jewels back again. She's changed her mind."

Mr. Rose took a ledger off the table, and ran his finger down its columns. "Quite correct, sir," said he, stopping at a particular entry. "You are acquainted with the circumstances, of course."

Dick nodded, esteeming it little breach of confidence to look as if he knew all about it.

"There is no difficulty whatever," continued the bland Mr. Rose. "Happy to oblige Miss Bruce. Happy to oblige *you*. We shall charge a small sum for commission. Nothing more—oh! dear, no! Have them cleaned up? Certainly, sir; and you may depend on their being sent home in time. At your convenience, Mr. Stanmore. No hurry, sir. You

can write me your cheque for the amount. Perhaps I'd better draw out a little memorandum. We shall make a mere nominal charge for cleaning."

Dick glanced over the memorandum, including its nominal charge for cleaning, which, perhaps from ignorance, did not strike him as being extraordinarily low. He was somewhat startled at the sum total, but when this gentleman made up his mind, it was not easy to turn him from an object in view.

The steppers, hardly cool, were hurried straight off to his banker's, to be driven, after their owner's interview with one of the partners, back again to the great emporium of their kind at Tattersall's.

A woman who wants to make a sacrifice parts with her jewels, a man sells his horses. Honour to each, for each offers up what is nearest and dearest to the heart.

Dick Stanmore lived no more within his income than other people. To get back these diamonds he would have to raise a considerable

sum. There was nothing else to be done. The hunters must go : nay, the whole stud, phaeton-horses, hacks, and all. Yet Dick marched into the office to secure stalls for an early date, with a bright eye and a smiling face. He was proving, to *himself*, at least, how well he loved her.

The first person he met in the yard was Lord Bearwarden. That nobleman, though knowing him but slightly, had rather a liking for Stanmore, cemented by a certain good run they once saw in company, when each approved of the other's straightforward riding and unusual forbearance towards hounds.

“There's a nice horse in the boxes,” said my lord; “looks very like your sort, Stanmore, and they say he'll go cheap, though he's quite sound.”

“Thanks,” answered Dick. “But I'm all the other way. Been taking stalls. Going to sell.”

“Draft?” asked his lordship, who did not waste words.

“All of them,” replied the other. “Even the hacks, saddlery, clothing, in short, the whole plant, and without reserve—going to give it up—at any rate for a time.”

“Sorry for that,” replied Bearwarden, adding, courteously, “Can I offer you a lift? I’m going your way. Indeed, I’m going to call at your mother’s. Shall I find the ladies at home?”

“A little later you will,” said honest, unsuspecting Dick, who had not yet learned the lesson that teaches it is not worth while to trust or mistrust any of the sex. “They’ll be charmed to give you some tea. I’m off to Croydon to look over my poor screws before they’re sold, and break it to my groom.”

“That’s a right good fellow,” thought Lord Bearwarden, “and not a bad connection if I was fool enough to marry the dark girl, after all.” So he called out to Dick, who had one foot on the step of his phaeton—

“I say, Stanmore, come and dine with us on the 11th; we’ve got two or three hunting

fellows, and we can go on together afterwards to your mother's ball.”

“All right,” said Stanmore, and bowled away in the direction of Croydon at the rate of fourteen miles an hour. If the horses were to be sold, people might just as well be made aware of the class of animal he kept. Though the sacrifice involved was considerable, it would be wise to lessen it by all judicious means in his power.

How great a sacrifice he scarcely felt till he arrived at his country stables.

Dick Stanmore had been fonder of hunting than any other pursuit in the world, ever since he went out for the first time on a Shetland pony, and came home with his nose bleeding, at five years old.

The spin and “whizz” of his reel, the rush of a brown mountain stream with its fringe of silver birch and stunted alder, the white side of a leaping salmon, and the gasp of that noble fish towed deftly into the shallows at last, afforded him a natural and unmixed pleasure.

He loved the heather dearly, the wild hill-side, the keen, pure air, the steady setters, the flap and cackle of the rising grouse, the ringing shot that laid him low, born in the purple, and fated there to die. Nor, when corn-fields were cleared and partridges almost as swift as bullets, and as numerous as locusts, were driven to and fro across the open, was his aim to be foiled by a flight little less rapid than the shot that arrested it. With a rifle in his hand, a general knowledge of the surrounding forest, and a couple of gillies, give him the wind of a royal stag feeding amongst his hinds, and, despite the feminine jealousy and instinctive vigilance of the latter, an hour's stalk would put the lord of the hills at the mercy of Dick Stanmore. In all these sports he was a proficient, from all of them he derived a keen gratification, but fox-hunting was his passion and his delight.

A fine rider, he loved the pursuit so well, and was so interested in hounds, that he gave his horse every opportunity of carrying him in front, and as his natural qualities included a

good eye, and that confidence in the immediate future which we call “nerve,” he was seen in difficulties less often than might be expected from his predilection in favour of “the shortest way.”

His horses generally appeared to go pleasantly, and to reciprocate their rider’s confidence, for he certainly seemed to get more work out of them than his neighbours.

As Mr. Crop, his stud-groom, remarked, in the peculiar style of English affected by that trustworthy but exceedingly impracticable servant—

“Take and put him on a ‘arf-bred’ ’oss, an’ he rides him like a hangel, nussin’ of him, and coaxin’ of him, and sendin’ of him along, *beautiful* for ground, an’ uncommon liberal for fences. Take an’ put him on a thoro’ bred ’un, like our Vampire ’oss, and—Lor !”

One secret perhaps of that success in the hunting-field, which, when well mounted, even Mr. Crop’s eloquence was powerless to express but by an interjection, lay in his master’s

affection for the animal. Dick Stanmore dearly loved a horse, as some men do love them, totally irrespective of any pleasure or advantage to be derived from their use.

There is a fanciful oriental legend which teaches that when Allah was engaged in the work of creation, he tempered the lightning with the south wind, and thus created the horse. Whimsical as is this idea, it yet suggests the swiftness, the fire, the mettlesome, generous, but plastic temperament of our favourite quadruped—the only one of our dumb servants in whose spirit we can rouse at will the utmost emulation, the keenest desire for the approval of its lord. Even the countenance of this animal denotes most of the qualities we affect to esteem in the human race—courage, docility, good-temper, reflection, (for few faces are so thoughtful as that of the horse), gratitude, benevolence, and, above all, trust. Yes, the full brown eye, large, and mild, and loving, expresses neither spite, nor suspicion, nor revenge. It turns on you with

the mute unquestioning confidence of real affection, and you may depend on it under all pressure of circumstance, in the last extremity of danger or death. Will you say as much for the bluest eyes that ever sparkled in mirth, or swam in tears, or shone and deepened under the combined influence of triumph, belladonna, and war-paint?

I once heard a man affirm that for him there was in every horse's face the beauty each of us sees in the one woman he adores. This outrageous position he assumed after a good run, and, indeed, after the dinner which succeeded it. I will not go quite so far as to agree with him, but I will say that in generosity, temper, and fidelity, there is many a woman, and man too, who might well take example from the noble qualities of the horse.

And now Dick Stanmore was about to offer up half a dozen of these valued servants before the idol he had lately begun to worship, for whom, indeed, he esteemed no victim too precious, no sacrifice too dear.

Driving into his stable-yard, he threw the reins to a couple of helpers, and made use of Mr. Crop's arm to assist his descent. That worthy's face shone with delight. Next to his horses he loved his master—chiefly, it is fair to say, as an important ingredient without which there would be no stud.

"I was expectin' of ye, sir," said he, touching an exceedingly straight-brimmed hat. "Glad to see ye lookin' so well."

To do him justice, Mr. Crop did his duty as if he always *was* expecting his master.

"Horses all right?" asked Dick, moving towards the stable-door.

"'Osses is 'ealthy, I am thankful to say," replied the groom, gravely, "and lookin', too, pretty nigh as I could wish, now they've done breakin' with their coats. There's Firetail got a queerish look—them Northamptonshire 'osses is mostly unsound ones—and the mare's off-leg's filled; and the Vampire 'oss, he's got a bit of a splent a-comin', but I'll soon frighten that away; an' old Dandybrush, he's awful,

but not wuss nor I counted; and the young un——”

“I’ll look ’em over,” said Dick, interrupting what threatened to be a long catalogue. “I came down on purpose. The fact is (take those horses out and feed them)—the fact is, Crop, I’m going to sell them all. I’m going to send them up to Tattersall’s.”

Every groom is more or less a sporting man, and it is the peculiarity of sporting men to betray astonishment at no eventuality, however startling; therefore Mr. Crop, doing violence to his feelings, moved not a muscle of his countenance.

“I’m sorry to part with them, Crop,” added Dick, a little put out by the silence of his retainer, and not knowing exactly what to say next. “They’ve carried me very well—I’ve seen a deal of fun on them—I don’t suppose I shall ever have such good ones—I don’t suppose I shall ever hunt much again.”

Mr. Crop began to thaw. “They’re *good* ’osses,” he observed sententiously; “but that’s

not to say as there isn't good 'osses elsewheres. In regard of not huntin' there's a many seasons, askin' your pardon, atween you and me, and I should be sorry to think as I wasn't goin' huntin', ay, twenty years from now! When is 'em goin' up, sir?" added he, sinking sentiment and coming to business at once.

"Monday fortnight," answered Dick, entering a loose box, in which stood a remarkably handsome mare, that neighed at him, and rubbed her head against his breast.

"I should ha' liked another ten days," replied Crop, for it was an important part of his system never to accept his master's arrangements without a protest. "I could ha' got 'em to show as they ought to show by then. Is the stalls took?"

Dick nodded. He was looking wistfully at the mare, thinking what a light mouth she had, and how boldly she faced water.

"That leg'll be as clean as my face in a week," observed Mr. Crop, confidently. "She'll fetch a good price, *she* will. Sir Frederic's

after *her*, I know. There's nothing but tares in there, sir, old Dandybrush is in the box on the right.”

Dick gave the mare a loving pat, and turned sadly into the residence of old Dandybrush.

That experienced animal greeted him with laid-back ears and a grin, as though to say, “Here you are again! But I like you best in your red coat.”

They had seen many a good gallop together, and rolled over each other with the utmost good-humour, in every description of soil. To look at the old horse, even in his summer guise, was to recall the happiest moments of a sufficiently happy life.

“I'd meant to guv it *him* pretty sharp,” said Crop; “but I'll let him alone now. He'd 'a carried you, maybe, another season or two, with a good strong dressin'; but them legs isn't what they *was*. Last time as I rode of him second horse, I found him different—gettin' inquisitive at his places—and when they gets inquisitive they soon begins to get slow.

You'll look at the Vampire 'oss, sir, before you go back to town?"

Now "the Vampire 'oss," as he called him, was an especial favourite with Mr. Crop. Dick Stanmore had bought him out of training at Newmarket by his groom's advice, and the highbred animal, being ridden by an exceedingly good horseman, had turned out a far better hunter than common—not invariably the case with horses that begin life on the Heath. Crop took great pride in this purchase, confidently asserting, and doubtless believing, that England could not produce its equal.

He threw the box-door open with the air of a man who is going to exhibit a picture of his own painting.

"It's a pity to let him go," said the groom, with a sigh. "Where'll you get another as can touch him when the ground's deep, like it was last March? I've had a many to look after, first and last; but such a kind 'oss to do for in the stable I never see. Why, if you was to give that 'oss ten feeds of corn a day he'd take

an' eat 'em all out clean—wouldn't leave a hoat !
And legs ! Them's not legs ! them's slips of
gutta-percher an' steel ! To be sure he'll
fetch a hawful price at the 'ammer—four
'underd, five 'underd, I shouldn't wonder—why
he's worth all the money to look at. Blessed
if you mightn't ride a good 'ack to death only
tryin' to find such another !"

Nevertheless, the Vampire horse was condemned to go up with the rest. Notwithstanding the truth of the groom's protestations, its money value was exactly the quality that decided the animal's fate.

Driving back to London, Dick's heart bounded to think that in an hour's time he should meet Miss Bruce again at dinner. How delightful to be doing all this for her sake, yet to keep the precious secret safe locked in his own breast, until the moment should come when it would be judicious to divulge it, making, at the same time, another confession, of which he hoped the result might be happiness for life.

"I'd do more than that for her," muttered this enthusiastic young gentleman, while he trotted over Vauxhall Bridge. "I liked my poor horses better than anything; and that's just the reason I like to part with them for her sake. My darling, I'd give you the heart out of my breast, even if I thought you'd tread it under foot and send it back again!"

Had such an anatomical absurdity been reconcilable with the structure of the human frame, it is possible Miss Bruce might have treated this important organ in the contumelious manner suggested.



CHAPTER XIII.

SIXES AND SEVENS.

IN the mean time, while Dick Stanmore is hugging himself in the warm atmosphere of hope, while Lord Bearwarden hovers on the brink of a stream in which he narrowly escaped drowning long ago, while Tom Ryfe is plunged in depths of anxiety, jealousy, and humiliation that scorch like liquid fire, Miss Bruce's dark eyes, and winning, wilful ways, have kindled the torch of mistrust and discord between two people of whom she has rarely seen the one and never heard of the other.

Mr. Bargrave's chambers in Gray's Inn were at no time more remarkable for cleanliness

than other like apartments in the same locality; but the dust lies inch-thick now in all places where dust *can* lie, because that Dorothea, more moping and tearful than ever, has not the heart to clean up, no nor even to wash her own hands and face in the afternoon, as heretofore.

She loves her "Jim," of course, all the more passionately that he makes her perfectly miserable, neglecting her for days together, and when they do meet, treating her with an indifference far more lacerating than any amount of cruelty or open scorn.

Not that he is always good-humoured. On the contrary, "Gentleman Jim," as they call him, has lost much of the rollicking, devil-may-care recklessness that earned his nickname, and is often morose now—sometimes even fierce and savage to brutality.

The poor woman has had a quarrel with him, not two hours ago, originating, it is but fair to state, in her own extremely irritating conduct regarding beer, Jim being anxious to treat his

ladye-love with that fluid for the purpose, as he said, of "drowning unkindness," and possibly with the further view of quenching an inconvenient curiosity she has lately indulged about his movements. No man likes to be watched; and the more reason the woman he is betraying has to doubt him, the less patience he shows for her anxiety, the less he tolerates her inquiries, her jealousy, or her reproaches.

Now Dorothea's suspicions, sharpened by affection, have of late grown extremely wearisome, and Jim has been heard to threaten, more than once, that "if so be as she doesn't mend her manners, and live conformable, he'll take an' hook it, he will, blessed if he won't!"—a dark saying which sinks deeply and painfully into the forlorn one's heart. When, therefore, instead of drinking her share, as usual, of a foaming quart measure containing beer, dashed with something stronger, this poor thing set it down untasted, and forthwith began to cry, the cracksman's anger knew no bounds.

“Drop it!” he exclaimed, brutally. “You’d best, I tell ye! D’ye think I want my blessed drink watered with your blessed nonsense? What’s come to ye, ye contrairy devil? I thought I’d larned ye better. I’ll see if I can’t larn ye still. Would ye now!”

It was almost a blow,—such a push as is the next thing to actual violence, and it sent her staggering from the sloppy bar at which their altercation took place against a bench by the wall, where she sat down pale and gasping, to the indignation of a slatternly woman nursing her child, and the concern of an honest coal-heaver, who had a virago of a wife at home.

“Easy, mate!” expostulated that worthy, putting his broad frame between the happy pair. “Hold on a bit, an’ give her a drop when she comes to. She’d a’ throwed her arms about your neck a while ago, an’ now she’d as soon knife ye as look at ye.”

Wild-eyed and pale, Dorothea glared round, as Clytemnestra may have glared when her hand rested on the fatal axe; but this Holborn

Agamemnon did not seem destined to fall by a woman's blow, inasmuch as the tide was effectually turned by another woman's interference.

The slatternly lady, shouldering her child, as a soldier does his firelock, thrust herself eagerly forward.

"Knife him!" she exclaimed, with a most unfeminine execration. "I'd knife him, precious soon, if it was me, the blessed willen! To take an' use a woman like that there—a nasty, cowardly, sneakin', ugly, tallow-faced beast!"

Had it not been for the imputation on his beauty, Dorothea might perhaps have blazed out in open rebellion, or remained passive in silent sulks; but to hear *her* Jim, the flash man of a dozen gin-shops, the beloved of a score of rivals, called "ugly," was more than flesh and blood could endure. She turned fiercely on her auxiliary and gave battle at once.

"And who arst *you* to interfere, mem, if I

may venture to make the inquiry?" said she, with that polite but spasmodic intonation that denotes the approaching row. "Keep yerself *to* yerself, if you please, mem. And I'll thank ye not to go for to come between me and my young man, not till you've got a young man of your own, mem, and if you'd like to walk out, there's the door, mem, and don't you try for to give *me* none o' your sauce, for I'm not a-goin' to put up with it."

The slatternly woman ran her guns out and returned the broadside with promptitude.

"Door, indeed! you poor whey-faced drab, you dare to say the word door to *me*, a respectable woman, as Mister Tripes here knows me well, and have a score against me behind that there wery door as you disgraces, and as it's *you* as ought to be t'other side, you ought, for it's out of the streets as *you* come, well I knows, an' say another word, and I'll take that there bonnet off of your head, and chuck it into them streets and *you* arter it. Oh dear! oh dear! that ever I should be spoke to like this

here, and my master out o' work a month come Toosday, and this here gentleman standing by ; but I'll set my mark on ye, if I get six months for it—I will !”

Thus speaking, or rather screaming, and brandishing her baby, as the gonfalonier waves his gonfalon, the slatternly woman, swelling into a fury for the nonce, made a dive at Dorothea, which, but for the interposition of “this here gentleman,” as she called the coalheaver, might have produced considerable mischief. That good man, however, took a deal of “weathering,” as sailors say, and ere either of the combatants could get round his bulky person, the presence of a policeman at the door warned them that ordeal by battle had better be deferred till a more fitting opportunity. They burst into tears therefore, simultaneously, and the dispute ended, as such disputes often do, in a general reconciliation, cemented by the consumption of much excisable fluid, some of it at the expense of the philanthropic coalheaver, whose simple faith

involved a persuasion that the closest connection must always be preserved between good-fellowship and beer.

After these potations, it is not surprising that the slatternly woman should have found herself, baby and all, under the care of the civil power at a police-station, or that Gentleman Jim and his ladye-love should have adjourned to sober themselves in the steaming gallery of a play-house.

Behold them, then, wedged into a front seat, Dorothea's bonnet hanging over the rail, Jim's gaudy handkerchief bulging with oranges, both spectators too absorbed in the action of the piece to realize its improbabilities, and the woman thoroughly identifying herself with the character and fortunes of its heroine.

The theatre is small, but the audience if not select are enthusiastic; the stage is narrow, but affords room for a deal of strutting and striding about on the part of an overpowering actor in the inevitable belt and boots of the melodramatic highwayman. The play represents

certain startling passages in the career of one Claude Duval, formerly a running footman, afterwards—strange anomaly!—a robber on horseback, distinguished for polite manners and bold riding.

This remarkable person has a wife, devoted to him of course. In the English drama all wives are good; in the French all are bad, and people tell you that a play is the reflection of real life. Besides this dutiful spouse, he cherishes an attachment for a young lady of high birth and aristocratic (stage) manners. She returns his tenderness, as it is extremely natural a young person so educated and brought up would return that of a criminal, who has made an impression on her heart by shooting her servants, rifling her trunks, and forcing her to dance a minuet with him on a deserted heath under a harvest moon.

This improbable incident affords a favourite scene, in which Dorothea's whole soul is absorbed, and to which Jim devotes an earnest attention, as of one who weighs the verisimili-

tude of an illustration, that he may accept the purport of the parable it conveys.

Dead servants (in profusion), struggling horses, the coach upset, and the harvest moon, are depicted in the back scene, which represents besides an illimitable heath, and a gibbet in the middle distance: all this under a glare of light, as indeed it might well be, for the moon is quite as large as the hind wheel of the coach.

In the foreground are grouped, the hero himself, a comic servant with a red nose and a fiddle, an open trunk, and a young lady in travelling costume, viz., white satin shoes, paste diamonds, ball-dress, and lace veil. The tips of her fingers rest in the gloved hand of her assailant, whose voice comes deep and mellow through the velvet mask he wears.

"My preservier!" says the lady, a little inconsequentially, while her fingers are lifted to the mask and saluted with such a smack as elicits a "hooray!" from some disrespectful urchin at the back of the pit.

"To presurrrve beauty from the jeer of

insult, the grasp of violence is my duty and my profession. To adore it is my religion—and my fate!” replies the gallant highwayman, contriving with some address to retain his hold of the lady’s hand, though encumbered by spurs, a sword, pistols, a mask, and an enormous three-cornered hat.

“And this man is proscribed, hunted, in danger, in disgrace!” exclaims the lady, aside, and therefore loud enough to be heard in the street. Claude Duval starts. The start of such an actor makes Dorothea jump. “Perdition!” he shouts, “ye have reminded me of what were well buried fathom-deep—obliterated—forgotten. Tr’you, lady, ’tis ee-ven so! I have a compact with my followers—the ransom!”

“Shall be paid right willingly,” she answers; and forthwith the comic servant with the red nose wakes into spasmodic life, winks repeatedly, and performs a flourish on his “property” fiddle, a little out of tune with the real instrument in the orchestra at his feet.

“What are they going to do?” asked Dorothea, in great anxiety.

“Hold your noise!” answers Jim, and the action of the piece progresses.

It is fortunate, perhaps, that minuets have gone out of fashion; if they involved such a test of endurance as that in which Claude Duval and his fair captive now disport themselves with an amount of bodily exertion it seems real cruelty to encore. His concluding caper shakes the mask from his partner’s face, and the young lady falls, with a shriek, into his arms, leaving the audience in that happy state of perplexity, which so enhances the interest of a plot, as to whether her distress originates in excess of sentiment or deficiency of wind.

“It’s beautiful!” whispers Dorothea, refreshing herself with an orange. “It ’minds me of the first time you and me ever met at Highbury Barn.”

Jim grunts, but his grunt is not that of a contented sleeper, rather of one who is woke from a dream.

After a tableau like the last, it is natural that Claude Duval should find a certain want of excitement in the next scene, where he appears as a respectable householder in the apartments of his lawful spouse. This lady, leaving a cradle in the background, and advancing to the footlights, proceeds to hover round her husband, after the manner of stage wives, with neck protruded and arms spread out, like a woman who is a little afraid of a wasp or earwig, but wants to catch the creature all the same. He sits with his back to her, as nobody ever does sit but a stage husband at home, and punches the floor with his spur. It is strictly natural that she should sing a faint song with a slow movement, on the spot.

It is perhaps yet more natural that this should provoke him exceedingly, so he jumps up, reaches a cupboard in two strides, and pulls out of it his whole paraphernalia, sword, pistols mask, three-cornered hat, everything but his horse. Then the wife, from her knees, informs all whom it may concern, that for the first time

in their happy married life she has learned her husband is a robber, as they both call it, by "prowfession."

Dorothea's sympathies, womanlike, are with the wife. Jim, whose interest is centred in the young lady, finds this part of the performance rather wearisome, and thirsts, to use his own expression, for "a drain."

Events now succeed each other with startling rapidity. Claude Duval is seen at Ranelagh, still in his boots, where he makes fierce love to his young lady, and exchanges snuff-boxes (literally) with a duke. Next, in a thicket, beset by thief-takers, from whom he escapes after prodigies of valour, aided by the comic servant, and thereafter guided by that singular domestic to a place of safety, which turns out to be the young lady's bedroom. Here Jim becomes much excited, fancying himself for the moment a booted hero, rings, laced-coat, Stein-kirk handkerchief, and all. His dress touches that of his companion, but instinctively he moves from her as far as the crowded seat

will permit, while Dorothea, all unconscious, looks lovingly in his face.

“She’s a bold thing, and I can’t abide her,” is that lady’s comment on the principal actress. “She ought to think shame of herself she ought, a-cause of his wife at ’ome. But he’s a good plucked-un, isn’t he, Jim? and, lady or no lady, that goes a long way with a woman!”

Jim turned his head aside. Brutalized, besotted, depraved, there was yet in him a spark of that fire which lights men to their doom, and his eyes filled with tears.

But the thief-takers have Claude Duval by the throat at last; and there is a scene in court, where the young lady perjures herself unhesitatingly, and faints once more in the prisoner’s arms. In vain. Claude Duval is sworn to, found guilty, condemned; and the stage is darkened for a grand finale.

Still gay, still gallant, still impenitent, and still booted, though in fetters, the highwayman sits in his prison cell, to be visited by the young lady, who cannot bear to lose her partner, and the

wife, who still clings to her husband. Unlike Macheath, he seems in no way embarrassed by the position. His wife forgives him, at this supreme moment, all the sorrow he has caused her, in consideration of some unexplained past, "gilded," as she expressed it, "by the sunny smiles of southern France," while the young lady, holding on with great tenacity to his hand, weeps frantically on her knees.

A clock strikes. It is the hour of execution. Dorothea begins to sob, and Gentleman Jim clenches his hands. The back of the stage opens, to disclose a street, a crowd, a hangman, and the fatal Tyburn tree. Faint cheers are heard from the wings. The sheriff enters bearing in his hand a reprieve, written apparently on a window-blind. He is attended by the comic servant, through whose mysterious agency a pardon has been granted, and who sticks by his fiddle to the last.

Grand tableau: Claude Duval penitent. His wife in his arms. The young lady conveying in dumb show how platonic has been her

attachment, of which, nevertheless, she seems a little ashamed. The sheriff benignant; the turnkeys amused; the comic servant, obviously in liquor, brandishing his fiddlestick, and the orchestra playing "God save the Queen."

Walking home through the wet streets, under the flashing gas-lights, Dorothea and her companion preserve an ominous silence. Both identify themselves with the fiction they have lately witnessed. The woman, pondering on Mrs. Duval's sufferings and the eventful reward of that good lady's constancy and truth; her companion reflecting, not on the charms of the actress he has lately been applauding, but on another face which haunts him now, as the wilis and water-sprites haunted their doomed votaries, and which must ever be as far out of reach as if it belonged indeed to some such being of another nature; thinking how a man might well risk imprisonment, transportation, hanging, for one kind glance of those bright eyes, one smile of those haughty, scornful lips; and comparing, in bitter impatience, that exotic

beauty with the humble, homely creature at his side.

She looks up in his face. "Jim," says she, timidly, and cowering close to him the while, "if you was took, and shopped, like him in the long boots, I'd go to quod with you, if they'd give me leave—I'd go to death with you, Jim, I would. I'd never forsake you, I wouldn't! I couldn't, dear,—not if it was ever so!"

He shudders and shrinks from her. "It might come sooner than you think for," says he, adding, brutally enough; "now you *could* do me a turn in the witness-box, though I shouldn't wonder but you'd cut out white like the others. Let's call in here, and take a drop o' gin afore they shuts up."

The great picture of Thomas the Rhymer, and his Elfin Mistress, goes on apace. There is, I believe, but one representation in London of that celebrated prophet, and it is in the possession of his lineal descendant. Every feature, every shadow on that portrait has

Simon Perkins studied with exceeding diligence and care, marvelling, it must be confessed, at the taste of the fairy queen. The accessories to his own composition are in rapid progress. Most of the fairies have been put in, and the gradual change from glamour to disillusion, cunningly conveyed by a stream of cold grey morning light entering the magic cavern from realms of upper earth, to deaden the glitter, pale the colouring, and strip, as it were, the tinsel where it strikes. On the Rhymer himself our artist has bestowed an infinity of pains, preserving (no easy task) some resemblance to the original portrait, while he dresses his conception in the manly form and comely features indispensable to the situation.

But it is into the fairy queen herself that Simon loves to throw all the power of his genius, all the resources of his art. To this labour of love, day after day, he returns with unabated zest, altering, improving, painting out, adding, taking away, drinking in the while his model's beauty, as parched and

thirsty gardens of Egypt drink in the overflowing Nile, to return a tenfold harvest of verdure, luxuriance, and wealth.

She has been sitting to him for three consecutive hours. Truth to tell, she is tired of death of it—tired of the room, the palette, the easel, the queen, the rhymers, the little dusky imp in the corner, whose wings are changing into scales and a tail, almost tired of dear Simon Perkins himself; who is working contentedly on (how can he?) as if life contained nothing more than effect and colouring—as if the reality were not better than the representation after all.

“A quarter of an inch more this way,” says the pre-occupied artist. “There is a touch wanting in that shadow under the eye—thanks, dear Nina. I shall get it at last,” and he falls back a step to look at his work, with his head on one side, as nobody but a painter *can* look, so strangely does the expression of face combine impartial criticism with a satisfaction almost maternal in its intensity.

Before beginning again, his eye rested on his model, and he could not but mark the air of weariness and dejection she betrayed.

“Why, Nina,” said he, “you look quite pale and tired. What a brute I am! I go painting on and forget how stupid it must be for you, who mustn’t even turn your head to look at my work.”

She gave a stretch, and such a yawn! Neither of them very graceful performances, had the lady been less fair and fascinating, but Nina looked exceedingly pretty in their perpetration nevertheless.

“Work,” she answered. “Do you call that work? Why you’ve undone everything you did yesterday, and put about half of it in again. If you’re diligent, and keep on at this pace, you’ll finish triumphantly with a blank canvas, like Penthesilea and her tapestry in my ancient history.”

“Penelope,” corrected Simon, gently.

“Well, Penelope! It’s all the same. I don’t suppose any of it’s true. Let’s have a

peep, Simon. It can't be. Is that really like me?"

The colour had come back to her face, the light to her eye. She was pleased, flattered, half amused to find herself so beautiful. He looked from the picture to the original, and with all his enthusiasm for art awarded the palm to nature.

"It *was* like you a minute ago," said he, in his grave, gentle tones. "Or rather, I ought to say you were like *it*. But you change so, that I'm often in despair of catching you, and, somehow, I always seem to love the last expression best."

There was something in his voice so admiring, so reverential, and yet so tender, that she glanced quickly, with a kind of surprise, in his face; that face, which, to an older woman, who had known suffering and sorrow, might have been an index of the gentle heart, the noble chivalrous character within, which, to this girl, was simply pale and worn, and not at all handsome, but very dear, nevertheless, as

belonging to her kind old Simon, the playmate of her childhood, the brother, and more than brother, of her youth.

Those encounters are sadly unequal, and very poor fun for the muffled fighter, in which one keeps the gloves on, while the other's blows are delivered with the naked fist.

Miss Algernon was at this time perhaps more attached to Simon Perkins than to any other creature in the world; that is to say, she did not happen to like anybody else better. How different from him, to whom she represented the very essence of that spiritual life which, in our several ways, we all try to live, which so few of us know how to attain by postponing its enjoyment for a few short troubled years.

It is probable that, if the painter had thrown down his brush at this juncture, and asked, simply, "Nina, will you be my wife?" she would have answered, "Thank you kindly, yes, I will!" but although his judgment told him he was likely to succeed, his finer in-

instincts warned him that an affirmative would be the sacrifice of her youth, her illusions, her possible future. Such sacrifice it was far more in Simon's nature to make than to accept.

"Will she ever know me thoroughly?" he used to think. "Will the time ever come when I can say to her, 'Nina, I am sure you care for me now, and therefore I am not afraid to tell you how dearly I loved you all through?' Such a time would be well worth waiting for, ay, though it never came for seven years, and seven more to the back of that. Then I should feel her happiness depended on mine. Now I often think the prince in the fairy tale will ride past our Putney villa some summer's day, like Launcelot through the barley sheaves (I'll paint Launcelot when I've time, with the ripe ears reddened in the sun, and the light flashing off his harness) ride by, and take Nina's heart away with him, and what will be left for me then? I could bear it! Yes, I could bear it if I knew she was happy. My darling, my darling! so that you walk on in

joy and triumph, it matters little what becomes of me!"

The sentiment was perhaps overstrained. It is not thus that women are won. The fruit that drops into people's mouths is usually over-ripe, and the Sabine maiden would have thought less of her Roman lover, though doubtless she would have taken the initiative rather than miss him altogether, had it been necessary to pounce on him in the vineyard and desire him straightway to carry her home. But the bird of prey must have its natural victim, and such hearts as our poor generous painter possessed are destined for the talons and the beak. Ah! those who value them least win the great prizes in the lottery. Fortune smiles on the careless player—gold goes to the rich—streams run to the river, and if you have more mutton than you know what to do with, be sure that in your folds will be found the poor man's ewe-lamb. Put a ribbon round her neck, and be kind to her as *he* was. It is the least you can do!

"You've taken a deal of pains, Simon," says the sitter, after a long and well-pleased scrutiny. "Tell me, no flattery now, why should I be so difficult to paint?" Why, indeed, you saucy innocent coquette! Perhaps, because, all the while, you are turning the poor artist's head, and driving pins and needles into his heart.

"I *ought* to make a good likeness of you," answers Simon, rather sadly. "I'm sure, Nina, I know your face by heart. But I'm determined to take enormous pains with this picture. It's to be my great work. I want them to admire it at the Academy. I want all London to come and look at it. I want the critics, who know nothing, to say it's well drawn; and the artists, who do know something, to say it's well treated; and the public to declare my fairy queen is the loveliest, and the sweetest, and the dearest face they ever beheld. You see I'm very—very—*ambitious*, Nina!"

"Yes, I suppose all painters are," replies

Miss Algernon, with a little gasp of relief, accompanied by a little chill of something not quite unlike disappointment. "But you ought to be tired of working, and I know I am tired of sitting. Hand me my bonnet, Simon—not upside down—why that's the top where the rose is, of course! And let's walk back through the Park. It will be nearly full by this time."

So they walked back through the Park and it *was* full—full to overflowing; nevertheless, amongst all the riders, drivers, sitters, strollers, and idlers, there appeared neither of the smart-looking gentlemen who had roused Nina's indignation by bowing to her in the morning, without having the honour of her acquaintance.



CHAPTER XIV.

THE OFFICERS' MESS.

A GIGANTIC sentry of Her Majesty's household cavalry paces up and down in front of the officers' quarters at Knightsbridge Barracks some two hours before watch-setting. It is fortunate that constant use has rendered him insensible to admiration. Few persons of either sex pass under his nose without a glance of unqualified approval. They marvel at his stature, his spurs, his carbine, his overalls, his plumed helmet, towering high above their heads, and the stupendous moustaches, on which this gentleman-private prides

himself more than on all the rest of his heroic attributes put together.

Beyond a shade of disciplined weariness, there is no expression whatever on his handsome face, yet it is to be presumed that the man has his thoughts too, like another. Is he back in Cumberland amongst his dales, a stalwart stripling, fishing some lonely stream within the hills, watching a bout at "knurr-and-spell" across the heather, or wrestling a fall in friendly rivalry with his cousin, a son of Anak, tall as himself? Does that purple sunset over Kensington Gardens remind him of Glaramara and Saddleback? Does that distant roar of wheels in Piccadilly recall the rush and ripple of the Solway charging up its tawny sands with the white horses all abreast in a spring-tide?

Perhaps he is wishing he was an officer with no kit to keep in order, no fatigue-duty to undergo, sitting merrily down to as good a dinner as luxury can provide, or a guest, of whom he has seen several pass his post in

starched white neckcloths and trim evening clothes. Perhaps he would not change with any of these, after all, when he reflects on his own personal advantages, his social standing amongst his comrades, his keen appreciation and large consumption of beer and tobacco, with the innumerable conquests he makes amongst maids and matrons in the middle and lower ranks of life. Such considerations, however, impress themselves not the least upon his outward visage. A statue could not look more imperturbable, and he turns his head but very slightly, with supreme indifference, when peals of laughter, more joyous than common, are wafted through the open windows of the mess-room, where some of our friends have fairly embarked on that tide of good-humour and hilarity which sets in with the second glass of champagne.

It is a full mess; the colonel himself sits at dinner, with two or three friends, old brothers-in-arms, whose soldierlike bearing and manly faces betray their antecedents, though they

may not have worn a uniform for months. A lately-joined cornet looks at these with a reverence that I am afraid could be extorted from him by no other institution on earth. The adjutant and riding-master, making holiday, are both present—"to the front," as they call it, enjoying exceedingly the jests and waggeries of their younger comrades. The orderly-officer, conspicuous by his belt, sits at one end of the long table. Lord Bearwarden occupies the other, supported on either side by his two guests, Tom Ryfe and Dick Stanmore. It is the night of Mrs. Stanmore's ball, and these last-named gentlemen are going there, with feelings how different, yet with the same object. Dick is full of confidence, elated and supremely happy. His entertainer experiences a quiet comfort and *bien-être* stealing over him, to which he has long been a stranger, while Tom Ryfe with every mouthful swallows down some emotion of jealousy, humiliation, or mistrust. Nevertheless, he is in the highest spirits of the three.

"I tell you nothing can touch him, my lord, when hounds run," says he, still harping on the merits of the horse he sold Lord Bearwarden in the Park. Of course half the party are talking of hunting, the other half of racing, soldiering, and women. "He'd have been thrown away on most of the fellows we know. He wants a good man on his back, for if you keep him fiddling behind, it breaks his heart. I always said you ought to have him—you or Mr. Stanmore. He's just the sort for both of you. I'm sorry to hear yours are all coming up at Tattersall's," adds Tom, with a courteous bow to the opposite guest. "Hope it's only to make room for some more."

Dick disclaims. "No, indeed," says he, "it's a *bonâ fide* sale—without reserve, you know—I am going to give the thing up!"

"Give up hunting!" expostulates a very young subaltern on Dick's left. "Why, you're not a soldier, are you? What shall you do with yourself? You have nothing to live for."

Overcome by this reflection, he empties his glass and looks feelingly in his neighbour's face.

"Are you so fond of it too?" asks Dick, with a smile.

"Fond of it! I believe you!" answers the boy. "What is there to be compared to it?—at least that I've tried, you know. I think the happiest fellow on earth is a master of fox-hounds, particularly if he hunts them himself: there's only one thing to beat it, and that's soldiering. I'd rather command such a regiment as this than be Emperor of China. Perhaps I shall, too, some day."

The real colonel, sitting opposite, overhears this military sentiment, and smiles good-humouredly at his zealous junior. "When you *are* in command," says he, "I hope you'll be down upon the cornets—they want a deal of looking up—I'm much too easy with them." The young soldier laughed and blushed. In his heart he thought the "chief," as he called him, the very greatest man in the world, offer-

ing him that respect combined with affection which goes so far to constitute the efficiency of a regiment, hoping hereafter to tread in his footsteps and carry out his system.

For ten whole minutes he held his tongue—and this was no small effort of self-restraint—that he might listen to the commanding officer's conversation with his guests, savouring strongly of professional interests, as comprising Crimean, Indian, and continental experiences, all tending to prove that cavalry massed, kept under cover, held well in hand, and “offered” at the critical moment, was *the* force to render success permanent and defeat irretrievable.

When they got into a dissertation on shoeing, with the comparative merits of “threes” and “sections” at drill, the young man refreshed himself liberally with champagne, and turned to more congenial discourse.

Of this there seemed no lack. The winner of the St. Leger was as confidently predicted as if the race were already in his owner's pocket. A match was made between two

splendid dandies, called respectfully by their comrades "Nobby" and "The Dustman," to walk from Knightsbridge Barracks to Windsor Bridge that day week—the odds being slightly in favour of "The Dustman," who was a peer of the realm. A moderate dancer was freely criticised, an exquisite singer approved with reservation, and the style of fighting practised by our present champion of the prize-ring unequivocally condemned. Presently a deep voice made itself heard in more sustained tones than belong to general conversation, and during a lull it became clear that the adjutant was relating an anecdote of his own military experience. "It's a wonderful country," said he, in reply to some previous observation. "I'm not an Irishman myself, but I've observed that the most conspicuous men in all nations are pure Irish or of Irish extraction. Look at the service. Look at the ring—prize-fighters and book-makers. I believe the Slasher's mother was born in Connaught, and nothing will convince me but that Deerfoot came

from Tipperary—east and west the world's full of them—they swarm, I'm told, in America, and I can answer for them in Europe. Did ye ever see a Turk in a vineyard? He's the very moral of Pat in a potato-garden: the same frieze coat—the same baggy breeches—the same occasional smoke, every five minutes or so—and the same rooted aversion to hard work. Go on into India—they're all over the place. Shall I tell you what happened to myself? We were engaged on the right of the army, getting it hot and heavy, all the horses with their heads up, but the men as steady as old Time. I was in the Lancers then, under Sir Hope. The Sikhs worked their guns beautifully, and presently we got the word to advance. It wasn't bad ground for manœuvring, and we were soon into them. The enemy fought a good one—those Sikhs always do. There was one fine old white-bearded patriarch stuck to his gun to the last. His people were all speared and cut down, but he never gave back an inch.

I can see him now, looking like the pictures of Abraham in my old Sunday-school book. I thought I'd save him if I could. Our chaps had got their blood up, and dashed in to finish him with their lances, but I kept them off with some difficulty, and offered him 'quarter.' I was afraid he wouldn't understand my language. 'Quarter,' says he, in the richest brogue you'll hear out of Cork—"quarter! you bloody thieves! will you stick a countryman, an' a comrade, ye murtherin' villains, like a *boncen* in a butcher's shop!" He'd have gone on, I dare say, for an hour, but the men had their lances through him before you could say 'knife.' As my right-of-threes, himself a Paddy, observed—he was discoorsin' the devil in less than five minutes. The man was a deserter and a renegade, so it served him right, but being an Irishman, you see, he distinguished himself—that's all I mean to infer."

The young officer was exceedingly attentive to an anecdote which, thus told by its bronzed,

war-worn, and soldier-like narrator, possessed the fascination of romance with the interest of reality.

Lord Bearwarden and his guests had also broken off their conversation to listen—they returned to the previous subject.

“There are so many people come to town now-a-days,” said his lordship, “that the whole thing spoils itself. Society is broken up into sets, and even if you belong to the same set, you cannot insure meeting any particular person at any particular place. Just the same with clubs. I might hunt you two fellows about all night, from Arthur’s to the Arlington—from the Arlington to White’s—from White’s to the Carlton—from the Carlton back to St. James’s Street—and never run into you at all, unless I had the luck to find you drinking gin and soda at Pratt’s.”

Tom Ryfe, belonging only to the last-named of these resorts, looked gratified. Dick Stanmore was thinking of something else.

“Now, to-night,” continued Lord Bear-

warden, turning to the latter, "although the ball is in your own stepmother's house, I'll take odds you don't know three-fourths of the people you'll meet, and yet you've been as much about London as most of us. Where they come from I can't think, and they're like the swallows, or the storks, or the woodcocks, only they're not so welcome. Where they'll go to when the season's over I neither know nor care."

Tom Ryfe would have given much to feel equally indifferent. Something like a pang shot through him as he reflected that for him the battle must be against wind and tide—a fierce struggle, more and more hopeless, to grasp at something drifting visibly out of reach. He was not a man, however, to be beat while it was possible to persist. Believing Dick Stanmore the great obstacle in his way, he watched that pre-occupied gentleman as a cat watches a mouse.

"I don't want to be introduced to any more people," said Dick, rather absently. "In my

opinion you can't have too few acquaintances and too many friends."

"One ought to know lots of *women*," said Mr. Ryfe, assuming the air of a fine gentleman, which fitted him, thought Lord Bearwarden, as ill as his uniform generally fits a civilian. "I mean women of position—who *give* things—whom you'd like to be seen talking to in the Park. As for girls, they're a bore—there's a fresh crop every season—they're exactly like each other, and you have to dance with 'em all!"

"Confound his impudence!" *thought* Lord Bearwarden; "does he hope to impose on *me* with his half-bred swagger, and Brummagem assurance?" but he only *said*, "I suppose, Tom, you're in great request with them—all ranks, all sorts, all ages! You fellows have such a pull over us poor soldiers; you can be improving the time while we're on guard."

Tom looked as if he rather believed he could. But he only *looked* it. Beneath that confident manner, his heart was sad and sink-

ing. How bitter he felt against Miss Bruce, and yet he loved her, in his own way too, all the while.

“Champagne to Mr. Stanmore!” said his entertainer, beckoning to a servant. “You’re below the mark, Stanmore, and we’ve a heavy night before us. Your thinking of your pets at Tattersall’s next week. Cheer up. Their future masters won’t be half so hard on them, I’ll be bound. But I wouldn’t assist at the sacrifice if I were you. Come down to the Den with me; we’ll troll for pike, and give the clods a cricket-match. Then we’ll dine early, set trimmers, and console ourselves with claret-cup under affliction.”

Dick laughed. Affliction, indeed, and he had never been so happy in his life! Perhaps that was the reason of his silence, his abstraction. At this very moment, he thought, Maud might be opening the packet he made such sacrifices to redeem. He had arranged for her to receive the diamonds all reset and glittering at the hour she would be dressing

for the ball. He could almost fancy he saw the beautiful face flushed with delight, the dark eyes filled with tears. Would she press those jewels to her lips, and murmur broken words of endearment for *him*? Would she not love him *now*, if, indeed, she had not loved him before? Horses, forsooth! What were all the horses that ever galloped compared to one smile of hers? He would have given her his right arm, his life, if she wanted it. And now, perhaps, he was to obtain his reward. Who could tell what that very night might bring forth?

Mr. Stanmore's glass remained untasted before him, and Lord Bearwarden observing that dinner was over, and his guests seemed disinclined to drink any more wine, proposed an adjournment to the little mess-room to smoke.

In these days the long sittings that delighted our grandfathers have completely given way to an early break up, a quiet cigar, and a general retreat, if not to bed, at least to other scenes and other society. In ten minutes from the rising of the colonel, Lord Bearwarden, and

half a dozen guests, the larger mess-room was cleared of its inmates, and the smaller one crowded with an exceedingly merry, and rather noisy assemblage.

“Just one cigar,” said Lord Bearwarden, handing a huge case to his friends. “It will steady you nicely for waltzing, and some eau-de-Cologne in my room will take off all the smell afterwards. I know you dancing swells are very particular.”

Both gentlemen laughed, and putting large cigars into their mouths, accommodated themselves with exceeding goodwill to the arrangement.

It was not in the nature of things that silence should be preserved under such incentives to conversation as tobacco and soda-water with something in it, but presently, above other sounds, a young voice was heard to clamour for a song.

“Let’s have a chant!” protested this eager voice; “the night is still young. We’re all musical, and we don’t often get the two best

pipes in the regiment to dine here the same day. Come, tune up, old boy. Give us ‘Twisting Jane,’ or the ‘Gallant Young Hussar.’”

The “old boy” addressed, a large, fine-looking man, holding the appointment of riding-master, smiled good-humouredly, and shook his head. “It’s too early for ‘The Hussar,’” said he, scanning the fresh, beardless face with its clear, mirthful eyes. “And it’s not an improving song for young officers, neither. I’ll try ‘Twisting Jane,’ if you gentlemen will support me with the chorus;” and in a deep, mellow voice he embarked without more ado on the following barrack-room ditty :—

“ I loved a girl, down Windsor way,
When we was lying there,
As soft as silk, as mild as May,
As timid as a hare.
She blushed and smiled, looked down so shy,
And then—looked up again—
My comrades warned me—‘ Mind your eye,
With Twisting Jane !’

- “ I wooed her thus, not sure but slow,
 To kiss she vowed a crime,—
For she was ‘reining back,’ you know,
 While I was ‘marking time.’
‘ Alas !’ I thought, ‘ these dainty charms
 Are not for me, ’tis plain ;
Too long she keeps me under arms,
 Does Twisting Jane.’
- “ Our corporal-major says to me,
 One day before parade,
‘ She’s gammoning you, young chap,’ says he,
 ‘ Is that there artful jade !
You’ll not be long of finding out,
 When nothing’s left to gain,
How quick the word is “ Threes about !”
 With Twisting Jane !’
- “ Our corporal-major knows what’s what ;
 I peeped above her blind,
The tea was made—the toast was hot—
 She looked so sweet and kind.
My captain in her parlour sat,
 It gave me quite a pain !
With coloured clothes, and shining hat,
 By Twisting Jane.
- “ The major he came cantering past,
 She bustled out to see,—
‘ Oh, major ! is it you at last ?
 Step in and take your tea.’

The major halted—winked his eye—
Looked up and down the lane,—
And in he went his luck to try
With Twisting Jane.

“ I waited at ‘ attention ’ there,
Thinks I, ‘ There’ll soon be more,’
The colonel’s phaeton and pair
Came grinding to the door.
She gave him such a sugary smile,
(Old men is very vain !)
‘ It’s you I looked for all the while,’
Says Twisting Jane.

“ ‘ I’ve done with you for good,’ I cried,
‘ You’re never on the square ;
Fight which you please on either side,
But hang it, lass, fight fair !
I won’t be last—I can’t be first—
So look for me in vain
When next you’re out “ upon the burst,”
Miss Twisting Jane !—
When next you’re out “ upon the burst,”
Miss Twisting Jane ! ”

“ A jolly good song,” cried the affable young gentleman who had instigated the effort, adding, with a quaint glance at the grizzled visage and

towering proportions of the singer, "you're very much improved, old chap—not so shy, more power, more volume. If you mind your music, I'll get you a place as a chorister-boy in the Chapel Royal, after all. You're just the size, and your manners the very thing!"

"Wait till I get *you* in the school with that new charger," answered the other, laughing. "I think, gentlemen, it's my call. I'll ask our adjutant here to give us 'Boots and Saddles,' you all like that game."

Tumblers were arrested in mid-air, cigars taken from smooth or hairy lips, while all eyes were turned towards the adjutant, a soldier down to his spurs, who "tuned up," as universally requested, without delay.

BOOTS AND SADDLES.

"The ring of a bridle, the stamp of a hoof,
Stars above, and a wind in the tree,—
A bush for a billet,—a rock for a roof,—
Outpost duty's the duty for me !

Listen. A stir in the valley below—

The valley below is with riflemen crammed,
Covering the column and watching the foe—

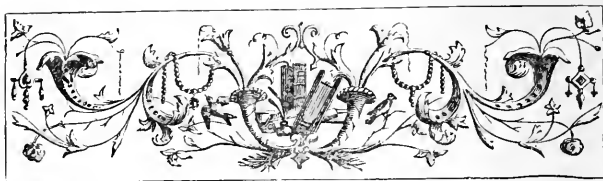
Trumpet-major!—Sound and be d—d!
Stand to your horses!—It's time to begin—
Boots and Saddles! The Pickets are in!

“ Though our bivouac-fire has smouldered away,
Yet a bit of good 'baccy shall comfort us well;
When you sleep in your cloak there's no lodging to pay,
And where we shall breakfast the devil can tell!
But the horses were fed, 'ere the daylight had gone,
There's a slice in the embers—a drop in the can—
Take a suck of it, comrade! and so pass it on,
For a ration of brandy puts heart in a man.
Good liquor is scarce, and to waste it a sin,—
Boots and Saddles! The Pickets are in!

“ Hark! there's a shot from the crest of the hill!
Look! there's a rocket leaps high in the air.
By the beat of his gallop, that's nearing us still,
That runaway horse has no rider, I'll swear!
There's a jolly light-infantry post on the right,
I hear their bugles—they sound the 'Advance.'
They will tip us a tune that shall wake up the night,
And we're hardly the lads to leave out of the dance.
They're at it already, I'm sure, by the din,—
Boots and Saddles! The Pickets are in!

“ They don’t give us long our divisions to prove—
Short, sharp, and distinct, comes the word of command.
‘ Have your men in the saddle—Be ready to move—
Keep the squadron together—the horses in hand—’
While a whisper’s caught up in the ranks as they form—
A whisper that fain would break out in a cheer—
How the foe is in force, how the work will be warm.
But, steady ! the chief gallops up from the rear.
With old ‘ Death-or-Glory ’ to fight is to win,
And the Colonel means mischief, I see by his grin.—
Boots and Saddles ! The Pickets are in !—
Boots and Saddles ! The Pickets are in ! ”

“ And it must be ‘ Boots and Saddles ’ with us,” said Lord Bearwarden to his guests as the applause subsided and he made a move towards the door, “ otherwise we shall be the ‘ lads to leave out of the dance,’ and I fancy that would suit none of us to-night.”



CHAPTER XV.

MRS. STANMORE AT HOME.

DANCING.

AMONGST all the magnificent toilettes composed to do honour to the lady whose card of invitation heads this chapter none appeared more variegated in colour, more startling in effect, than that of Mrs. Puckers the maid.

True, circumstances compelled her to wear a high dress, but even this modest style of costume in the hands of a real artist admits of marvellous combinations and extraordinary

breadth of treatment. Mrs. Puckers had disposed about her person as much ribbon, tulle, and cheap jewelry as might have fitted out a fancy fair. Presiding in a little breakfast-room off the hall, pinning tickets on short red cloaks, shaking out skirts of wondrous fabrication, and otherwise assisting those beautiful guests who constituted the entertainment, she afforded a sight only equalled by her after-performances in the tea-room, where, assuming the leadership of a body of handmaidens almost as smart as herself, she formed, for several waggish and irreverent young gentlemen, a principal attraction in that favourite place of resort.

A ball is so far like a run with fox-hounds that it is difficult to specify the precise moment at which the sport begins. Its votaries gather by twos and threes attired for pursuit; there is a certain amount of refitting practised, as regards dress and appointments, while some of the keenest in the chase are nevertheless the latest arrivals at the place of meeting. Pre-

sently are heard a note or two, a faint flourish, a suggestive prelude. Three or four couples get cautiously to work, the music swells, the pace increases, ere long the excitement extends to all within sight or hearing, and a performance of exceeding speed, spirit, and severity is the result.

Puckers, with her mouth full of pins, is rearranging the dress of a young lady in her first season, to whom, as to the inexperienced hunter, that burst of music is simply maddening. She is a well-bred young lady, however, and keeps her raptures to herself, but is slightly indignant at the very small notice taken of her by Dick Stanmore, who rushes into the tiring-room, drops a flurried little bow, and hurries Puckers off into a corner, totally regardless of the displeasure with which a calm, cold-looking chaperon regards this unusual proceeding.

"Did it come in time?" says Dick in a loud agitated whisper. "Did you run up with it directly? Was she pleased? Did she say anything? Has she got them on now?"

“Lor, Mr. Stanmore!” exclaims Puckers, “whatever do you mean?”

“Miss Bruce—the diamonds,” explains Dick, in a voice that causes two dandies, recently arrived, to pause in astonishment on the staircase.

“Oh! the diamonds!” answers Puckers. “Only think now. Was it *you*, sir? Well, I never. Why, sir, when Miss Bruce opens the packet, not half an hour ago, the tears comes into her eyes, and she says, ‘Well, this *is* kind’—them was her very words—‘this *is* kind,’ says she, and pops ’em on that moment; for I’d done her hair and all. Go up stairs, Mr. Stanmore, and see how she looks in them. I’ll wager she’s waiting for Somebody to dance with her this very minute!”

Though it is too often of sadly short duration, every man *has* his “good time” for a few blissful seconds during life. Let him not complain they are so brief. It is something to have at least tasted the cup, and perhaps it is better to turn with writhing lips from the bitter

drop near the brim than, drinking it fairly out, to find its sweets pall on the palate, its essence cease to warm the heart and stimulate the brain.

Dick, hurrying past his mother into the soft, mellow, yet brilliant radiance of her crowded ball-room, felt for that moment the happiest man in London.

Miss Bruce was *not* waiting to dance with him, according to her maid's prediction, but was performing a waltz in exceeding gravity, assisted, as Dick could not help observing with a certain satisfaction, by the ugliest man in the room. The look she gave him when their eyes met at last sent this shortsighted young gentleman up to the seventh heaven. It seemed well worth all the hunters in Leicestershire, all the diamonds in Golconda! He did the honours of his stepmother's house, and thanked his own friends for coming, but all with the vague consciousness of a man in a dream. Presently the "round" dance came to an end, much to the relief of the ugly man,

who cared, indeed, for ladies as little as ladies cared for him, and Dick hastened to secure Miss Bruce as a partner for the approaching "square." She was engaged, of course, six deep, but she put off all her claimants and took Mr. Stanmore's arm. "He's my cousin, you know," said she, with her rare smile, "and cousins don't count; so you're all merely put back *one*. If you don't like it, you needn't come for it—*C'est tout simple!*"

Then they took their places, and the dark eyes looked full into his own. Dick felt he was winning in a canter.

Miss Bruce put her hand on the collar of diamonds round her neck. "I'm glad you're *not* my cousin," she said; "I'm glad you're *not really* a relation. You're far dearer as it is. You're the best friend and truest gentleman I ever met in my life. Now I shan't thank you any more. Mind your dancing, and set to that gawky woman opposite. Isn't she badly dressed?"

How could Dick tell? He didn't even know

he had a *vis-à-vis*, and the "gawky woman," as Miss Bruce most unjustly called her, only wondered anybody could make such blunders in so simple a figure as the *Eté*. His head was in a whirl. A certain chivalrous instinct warned him that this was no time, while his idol lay under a heavy obligation, to press his suit. Yet he could not, for the life of him, help venturing a word.

"I look at nobody but you," he answered, turning pale as men do when they are in sad earnest. "I should never wish to see any other face than yours for the rest of my life."

"How tired you'd get of it," said she, with a bright smile; but she timed her reply so as to embark immediately afterwards on the *Chaine des Dames*, a measure exceedingly ill calculated for sustained conversation, and changed the subject directly she returned to his side.

"Where did you dine?" she asked, saucily. "With those wild young men at the barracks, I suppose. I knew you would: and you did all sorts of horrid things, drank and smoked—

I'm *sure* you smoked." She put her laced handkerchief laughingly to her nose.

"I dined with Bearwarden," answered honest Dick, "and he's coming on here directly with a lot of them. My mother will be so pleased—it's going to be a capital ball."

"I thought Lord Bearwarden never went to balls," replied the young lady, carelessly; but her heart swelled with gratified vanity to think of the attraction that drew him now to every place where he could hear her voice and look upon her beauty.

"There he is," was her partner's comment, as his lordship's head appeared in the doorway. "We'll have one more dance, Miss Bruce—Maud—before the night is over?"

"As many as you please," was her answer, and still Dick felt he had the race in hand and was winning in a canter.

People go to balls for pleasure, no doubt, but it must be admitted, nevertheless, that the pleasure they seek there is of a delusive kind and lasts but for a few minutes at a time.

Mr. Stanmore's whole happiness was centred in Miss Bruce, yet it was impossible for him to neglect all his stepmother's guests because of his infatuation for one, nor would the usages of society's Draconic laws, that are not to be broken, permit him to haunt that one presence, which turned to magic a scene otherwise only ludicrous for an hour or so, and simply wearisome as it went on.

So Dick plunged into the thick of it, and did his duty manfully, diving at partners right and left, yet, with a certain characteristic loyalty, selecting the least attractive amongst the ladies for his attentions. Thus it happened that as the rooms became crowded, and half the smartest people in London surged and swayed upon the staircase, he lost sight of the face he loved for a considerable period, and was able to devote much real energy to the success of his stepmother's ball, uninfluenced by the distraction of Miss Bruce's presence.

This young lady's movements, however, were not unobserved. Puckers, from her position

behind the cups and saucers, enjoyed great reconnoitring opportunities, which she did not suffer to escape unimproved—the tea-room, she was aware, held an important place in the working machinery of society, as a sort of neutral territory, between the cold civilities of the ball-room and the warmer interest fostered by juxta-position in the boudoir, not to mention a wicked little alcove beyond, with low red velvet seats, and a subdued light suggestive of whispers and provoking question rather than reply.

Puckers was not easily surprised. In the housekeeper's room she often thanked her stars for this desirable immunity, and indeed on the present occasion had furnished a loving couple with tea, whose united ages would have come hard upon a century, without moving a muscle of her countenance, albeit there was something ludicrous to general society in the affectation of concealment with which this long-recognised attachment had to be carried on. The gentleman was bald and corpulent. The lady

—well, the lady had been a beauty thirty years ago, and dressed the character still. There was nothing to prevent their seeing each other every day and all day long, if they chose, yet they preferred scheming for invitation to the same places, that they might meet *en evidence* before the public ; and dearly loved, as now, a retirement into the tea-room, where they could enact their *rôle* of turtle-doves, uninterrupted, yet not entirely unobserved.

Perhaps, after all, this imaginary restraint afforded the little spice of romance that preserved their attachment from decay.

Puckers, I say, marvelled at these not at all, but she did marvel, and admitted it, when Miss Bruce, entering the tea-room, was seen to be attended, not by Mr. Stanmore, but by Lord Bearwarden.

Her dark eyes glittered, and there was an exceedingly becoming flush on the girl's fair face, usually so pale. Her maid thought she had never seen Maud look so beautiful, and to judge by the expression of his countenance, it

would appear Lord Bearwarden thought so too. They had been dancing together, and he seemed to be urging her to dance with him again. His lordship's manner was more eager than common, and in his eyes came an anxious expression that only one woman, the one woman it was so difficult to forget, had ever been able to call into them before.

"Look odd!" he repeated, while he set down her cup and gave her back the fan he had been holding. "I thought you were above all that, Miss Bruce, and did what you liked, without respect to the fools who stare and can't understand."

She drew up her head with a proud gesture peculiar to her. "How do you know I do like it?" said she, haughtily.

He looked hurt, and lowered his voice to a whisper. "Forgive me," he said, "I have no right to suppose it. I have been presumptuous, and you are entitled to be unkind. I have monopolized you too much, and you're—you're bored with me. It's my own fault."

"I never said so," she answered in the same tone; "who is unkind now?" Then the dark eyes were raised for one moment to look full in his, and it was all over with Lord Bearwarden.

"You will dance with me again before I go," said he, recovering his former position with an alacrity that denoted some previous practice. "I shall ask nobody else—why should I? You know I only came here to see *you*. One waltz, Miss Bruce—promise!"

"I promise," she answered, and again came into her eyes that smile which so fascinated her admirers to their cost. "I shall get into horrid disgrace for it, and so I shall for sitting here so long now. I'm always doing wrong. However, I'll risk it if you will."

Her manner was playful, almost tender; and Puckers, adding another large infusion of tea, wondered to see her look so soft and kind.

A crowded waltz was in course of performance, and the tea-room, but for this pre-occupied couple, would have been empty.

Two men looked in as they passed the door, the one hurried on in search of his partner, the other started, scowled, and turned back amongst the crowd. Puckers, the lynx-eyed, observing and recognizing both, had sufficient skill in physiognomy to pity Mr. Stanmore and much mistrust Tom Ryfe.

The former, indeed, felt a sharp, keen pang, when he saw the face that so haunted him in close proximity to another face belonging to one who, if he should enter for the prize, could not but prove a dangerous rival. Nevertheless, the man's generous instincts stifled and kept down so unworthy a suspicion, forcing himself to argue against his own conviction that, at this very moment, the happiness of his life was hanging by a thread. He resolved to ignore everything of the kind. Jealousy was a bad beginning for a lover, and after all, if he should allow himself to be jealous of every man who admired and danced with Maud, life would be unbearable. How despicable, besides, would she hold such a sentiment! With

her disposition, how would she resent anything like *espionage* or *surveillance* ! How unworthy it seemed both of herself and of him ! In two minutes he was heartily ashamed of his momentary discomfiture, and plunged energetically once more into the duties of the ball-room. Nevertheless, from that moment, the whole happiness of the evening had faded out for Dick.

There is a light irradiating all such gatherings which is totally irrespective of gas or wax candles. It can shed a mellow lustre on dingy rooms, frayed carpets, and shabby furniture ; nay, I have seen its tender rays impart a rare and spiritual beauty to an old, worn, long-loved face ; but on the other hand, when this magic light is quenched or even temporarily shaded, not all the illuminations of a royal birthday are brilliant enough to dispel the gloom its absence leaves about the heart.

Mr. Stanmore, though whirling a very handsome young lady through a waltz, began to think it was not such a good ball after all.

Tom Ryfe, on the other hand, congratulated himself on his tactics in having obtained an invitation, not without considerable pressure put upon Miss Bruce, for a gathering, of which his social standing hardly entitled him to form a part. He was now, so to speak, on the very ground occupied by the enemy, and though he saw defeat imminent, could at least make his own effort to avert it. After all his misgivings as regarded Stanmore, it seemed that he had been mistaken, and that Lord Bearwarden was the rival he ought to dread. In any case but his own, Mr. Ryfe was a man of the world quite shrewd enough to have reasoned that in this duality of admirers there was encouragement and hope. But Tom had lost his heart, such as it was; and his head, though of much better material, had naturally gone with it. Like other gamblers, he determined to follow his ill-luck to the utmost, bring matters to a crisis, and so know the worst. In all graver affairs of life, it is doubtless good sense to look a difficulty in the face; but in

the amusements of love and play practised hands leave a considerable margin for that uncertainty which constitutes the very essence of both pastimes; and this is why, perhaps, the man in earnest has the worst chance of winning at either game.

So Tom Ryfe turned back into the crowd, and waited his opportunity for a few minutes' conversation with Miss Bruce.

It came at last. She had danced through several engagements, the night was waning, and a few carriages had already been called up. Maud occupied the extreme end of a bench, from which a party of ladies had just risen to go away; she had declined to dance, and for the moment was alone. Tom slipped into the vacant seat by her side and thus cut her off from the whole surrounding world. A waltz requiring much terrific accompaniment of brass instruments pealed out its deafening strains within ten feet of them, and in no desert island could there have been less likelihood that their conversation would be overheard.

Miss Bruce looked very happy, and in thorough good-humour. Tom Ryfe opened the trenches quietly enough.

"You haven't danced with me the whole evening," said he, with only rather a bitter inflection of voice.

"You never asked me," was the natural rejoinder.

"And I'm not going to ask you now," proceeded Mr. Ryfe; "you and I, Miss Bruce, have something more than a mere dancing acquaintance, I think."

An impatient movement, a slight curl of the lip, was the only answer.

"You may drop an acquaintance when you are tired of him, or a friend when he gets troublesome. It's done every day. It's very easy, Miss Bruce."

He spoke in a tone of irony that roused her.

"Not so easy," she answered, with tightening lips, "when people have no tact—when they are not *gentlemen*."

The taunt went home. The beauty of Mr. Ryfe's face was at no time in its expression—certainly not now. Miss Bruce, too, seemed well disposed to fight it out. Obviously it must be war to the knife!

“Did you get my letter?” said he, in low, distinct syllables. “Do you believe I mean what I say? Do you believe I mean what I *write*?”

She smiled scornfully. A panting couple who stopped just in front of them imagined they were interrupting a flirtation, and, doing as they would be done by, twirled on.

“I treat all begging-letters alike,” answered Maud, “and make yours no exception, because they contain threats and abuse into the bargain. You have chosen the wrong person to try and frighten, Mr. Ryfe. It only shows how little you understand my character.”

He would have caught at a straw even then. “How little chance I have had of studying it!” he exclaimed. “It is not my fault. Heaven knows I have been kept in ignorance, un-

certainly, suspense, till it almost drove me mad. Miss Bruce, you have known the worst of me; only the worst of me, indeed, as yet."

The man was pleading for his life, you see. Was it pitiable, or only ludicrous, that his voice and manner had to be toned down to the staid pitch of general conversation, that a fat and happy German was puffing at a cornet-à-piston within arm's length of him? But for a quiver of his lip, any bystander might have supposed he was asking Miss Bruce if he should bring her an ice.

"I have seen enough!" she replied, very resolutely, "and I am determined to see no more. Mr. Ryfe, if you have no pleasanter subjects of conversation than yourself and your arrangements, I will ask you to move for an instant that I may pass and find Mrs. Stanmore."

Lord Bearwarden was at the other end of the room, looking about apparently for some object of unusual interest. Perhaps Miss Bruce saw him—as ladies do see people without

turning their eyes—and the sight fortified her resolution.

“Then you defy me!” whispered Tom, in the low suppressed tones that denote rage, concentrated and intensified for being kept down. “By Heaven, Miss Bruce, you shall repent it! I’ll show you up! I’ll expose you! I’ll have neither pity nor remorse! You think you’ve won a heavy stake, do you? Hooked a big fish, and need only pull him ashore? *He* shan’t be deceived! *He* shall know you for what you are! He shall, by ——!”

The adjuration with which Mr. Ryfe concluded this little ebullition was fortunately drowned to all ears but those for which it was intended by a startling flourish on the cornet-à-piston. Miss Bruce accepted the challenge readily. “Do your worst!” said she, rising with a scornful bow, and taking Lord Bearwarden’s arm, much to that gentleman’s delight, walked haughtily away.

Perhaps this declaration of open war may have decided her subsequent conduct; perhaps

it was only the result of those circumstances which form the meshes of a certain web we call Fate. Howbeit, Miss Bruce was too tired to dance. Miss Bruce would like to sit down in a cool place. Miss Bruce would not be bored with Lord Bearwarden's companionship, not for an hour, not for a week—no, not for a lifetime!

Dick Stanmore, taking a lady down to her carriage, saw them sitting alone in the tea-room, now deserted by Puckers and her assistants. His honest heart turned very sick and cold. Half an hour after, passing the same spot, they were there still; and then, I think, he knew that he was overtaken by the first misfortune of his life.

Later, when the ball was over, and he had wished Mrs. Stanmore good-night, he went up to Maud with a grave, kind face.

"We never had our waltz, Miss Bruce," said he; "and—and—there's *a reason*, isn't there?"

He was white to his very lips. Through all

her triumph, she felt a twinge, far keener than she expected, of compunction and remorse.

“Oh, Dick!” she said, “I couldn’t help it! Lord Bearwarden proposed to me in that room.”

“And you accepted him?” said Dick, trying to steady his voice, wondering why he felt half suffocated all the time.

“And I accepted him!”

END OF VOL. I.



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